The Formation of Conventions for Internet Activities  
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X.1 Introduction

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Introduction

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In framing the topic of the workshop which led to this collection the editors extended its remit from the governance of the technical structures of the Internet to the emergence of less clearly articulated but nonetheless highly significant norms of behavior. They suggested that in order adequately to address issues of governance we need to be aware that much of what the Internet comes to be is shaped from the bottom up, by its users, as much as it is dictated from the top down by its inventors, its vendors and its regulators. While some versions of Internet governance focus exclusively on the allocation of addresses and domain names, the issues far exceed this technical focus (MacLean 2004). The existing governance of the Internet is itself an emergent mosaic (Dutton and Peltu 2007) comprised of many different approaches and focusing on diverse objects of regulation. In this chapter I will be focusing on part of the level of governance which Dutton and Peltu (2007) term “user-centric”. I will be looking at the ways in which users themselves conceive of appropriate standards of behavior on the Internet, and the mechanisms and frames of reference which they deploy to do so.

Ideas about appropriate standards of behavior do not arise through a formulaic consumption of generalized sets of rules, but emerge from highly specific interactions between interpretations of diverse governance regimes and other ways of making sense of online activities. This chapter examines the question of emergent standards of practice, looking at how people develop their own norms of Internet use and analysing the contexts which they draw upon in the course of deciding on appropriate behavior, as individuals and as groups of individuals with specific allegiances. I focus particularly on the emergence of social norms for Internet behavior as an ethnographic question. I will not immediately therefore be discussing how the Internet should be the subject of governance and regulation. I will instead look at some structures of usage that emerge in practice, and the ways in which these involve notions of appropriate use and legitimate controls drawn from diverse sources. The aim is to demonstrate that whether the Internet is an
appropriate object upon which to focus efforts at governance is far from settled, but that this uncertainty can be a valuable opportunity for stimulating debate.

This chapter introduces some ethnographic accounts of Internet use that shed light on the way that conventions for Internet activities arise. These accounts are used to demonstrate that the relevant context for self-regulation of behavior is an emergent phenomenon, not to be assumed in advance based on the features of the medium alone. Section X.2 introduces the concept of online communities. These social formations develop their own specific norms of behavior within the Internet environment, and in some instances the online setting provides the context for standards of behavior to be negotiated that have little obvious connection with offline behavioral norms. For example, Slater’s (2002) ethnographic work on the online trading of sex pictures shows that what might have been thought an “anything goes” arena was instead thoroughly socially regulated. The online sphere developed its own standards, and its own sanctions for dealing with transgressors, and, indeed, its own sense of itself as a discrete sphere.

This vision of an online sphere separate in its conventions from offline life pervaded much of the early writing about the Internet. Such visions reinforce the perception that there is a separate domain of Internet sociality to govern, and that this somehow exceeds or evades other forms of national governance and behavioral regulation. It is clear by now, however, that the notion of a distinct virtual sphere comprised of online communities only describes a small proportion of the everyday experience of Internet use. More usually conventions are transferred from offline contexts, in order to make the online a workable part of an existing communicative ecology (Tacchi, Slater and Hearn 2003). To illustrate this point, in Section X.3 I turn to some ethnographic studies which have focused on connections across the online/offline boundary. I discuss diverse case studies, including explorations of the use of the Internet by transnational communities, and of the use of the Internet in Chinese political life. These case studies are used to examine the idea that the relevant framework for understanding the normative structures of Internet activities is not necessarily to be found on the Internet. Instead, reference is made on a highly variable and emergent basis to different frameworks within which online activities are rendered as appropriate, meaningful and acceptable.

To conclude Section X.3 I describe an ethnographic study I have recently conducted focusing on a scientific discipline’s deployment of the Internet. In that study I found that the material and virtual cultures of this scientific discipline were thoroughly entwined, and that while practitioners embraced online communication both for its functionality and its symbolic qualities, they were very concerned to use it in ways that fitted with their existing ethos. In this context, then, the prevailing culture of the discipline largely shaped ideas about the use of the Internet and corresponding efforts were made to develop Internet activities that fitted with existing governance structures and values. However, the very possibility of Internet communications provided the occasion for discussions that ranged across the practices and expectations of the discipline. The coming of the Internet can thus be an opportunity to stimulate wide ranging discussions about standards and regulation: its perceived novelty is a resource to encourage people to talk about issues they might otherwise take for granted. The concluding section of the chapter then
examines the implications of these observations for the ongoing project of Internet governance.

X.2 The Internet as a discrete social sphere
There is now an extensive ethnographic literature describing the development of social formations in online settings. Observers of online behavior have argued that complex social structures can emerge on the Internet (Jones 1995). This ability to develop social structure means that it is possible for online contexts to set themselves apart from other contexts both online and offline, and for these new online contexts to develop their own social orthodoxies. In self-defining as communities, and in mutually reinforcing a collective identity, and a set of values and norms of behavior, these online contexts are able to sustain a discrete social sphere. The orthodoxy which develops in such settings can be quite distinct from that which prevails offline, particularly because the Internet provides the possibility for like-minded people to come together across geographic and temporal separation.

One of the most influential depictions of online communities has been Baym’s (1995; 2000) discussion of an online soap opera discussion group. Baym describes the formation of a community within which very specific understandings of appropriate behavior prevail, including a norm of friendship, a focus on social support and an appreciation of humour. In one sense this community is very closely tied to the offline context, a television soap opera, which it celebrates. Baym (2000) demonstrates, however, that this group also develops a highly specific relationship to the soap opera and it is this specificity which she argues demarcates it as a community of practice in its own right. The online realm of the discussion group is treated by participants as a discrete social sphere and the appropriate standards of behavior are understood in relation to that discrete sphere. Whilst there are no overt mechanisms of social control, appropriate behavior is regulated through the collective identification of deviance and chastising of offenders. This perspective on the online community as a self-contained normative entity has been a particularly influential way of understanding the Internet, countering the opposing tendency to think of the Internet as socially anarchic.

Another influential early discussion of the emergence of norms of behavior on the Internet was provided by the observation of MUDs. These online text-based role-playing games allowed players to adopt a persona and interact with one another in real-time within a fantasy environment described in text. Dibbell (1999) recounted an incident in one MUD which led participants to reflect on the appropriate mechanisms for social control and the potential links between online transgressions and offline structures. The incident which Dibbell describes was a virtual rape, in which one character in the MUD developed a “voodoo doll” programme which produced the effect of other characters being compelled to carry out his wishes. Those subjected to this programme experienced it as a violation, and subsequent community outrage led to discussion of a range of possible sanctions. The end result for this community was institution of a system of online voting in order to decide upon appropriate punishments. These punishments were wholly “in-game”, generally involving banning of players who transgressed community expectations.
Looking across online communities, both the norms and the mechanisms through which these norms are identified and enforced vary. Baym’s largely female soap opera fans maintained broadly feminine norms of friendship and social support through collective action and chastisement of offenders. Dibbell’s MUD users developed a pseudo-legal structure to enforce behavioral standards fairly continuous with, even though separated from, offline standards which protect the integrity of the individual against violation. Phillips (1996) studied one newsgroup during a period of crisis, and found that members were drawn to rhetorical strategies for dealing with unacceptable behavior, rather than appealing to structural resources such as the input of employers, network providers or deployment of offline legal sanctions. Williams (2007), however, describes an online community moving away from “vigilante” modes of regulation towards more structured and formal styles of policing, albeit still confined to online sanctions. Looking at large sample of online communities using data mining techniques, Barzilai-Nahon and Neumann (2005) describe the self-regulation of online communities as an efficient alternative to state regulation. Communities with a strong core of members were found to develop their own mechanisms to regulate behavior via deletion of inappropriate messages, often building on the social capital of long-established members of the group. There is, in fact, an extensive literature focusing on the diverse means online communities use to regulate themselves and sustain standards of behavior which the majority of those involved will consider acceptable (Wall and Williams 2007).

The situations described by Baym and Dibbell involve social norms which, whilst enforced online, are fairly recognisable from the offline environment. It is by no means guaranteed, however, that there will be any continuity between online and offline norms. From the observation that online settings can develop as discrete social spheres it follows that orthodoxies can be developed in relation to these specific situations and may not reproduce those that prevail offline. One of the most extreme examples of the situational construction of orthodoxy is the networks which form around otherwise taboo or deviant practices. Turning taboo into the mainstream is facilitated by the ability to speak openly about these issues and create networks within which such talk is sanctioned or celebrated. It has thus been possible for networks to arise in which, for example, self-harm and anorexia, otherwise the target of attempts to treat and control, are celebrated and reinforced by proponents (Tierney 2006). Alternative orthodoxies thus can and do arise in opposition to and in separation from the mainstream. It is important to stress that in no way are these separate networks unregulated or free from social norms. Quite the contrary, there can be rigid and strongly enforced ideas about appropriate behavior. I will describe here one example, which shows how highly socially regulated apparently deviant practices can be in online settings.

The example which I will describe is an ethnography conducted by Slater (2002). In this paper he analyses the trading of sex pictures via IRC channels, arenas where participants are identified to one another by nicknames, and interactions have a largely ephemeral quality. People take part in a variety of relationships ranging from impersonal trading of pictures through to eroticised exchanges. Slater argues that, far from celebrating the ephemeral and virtualised quality of interactions, participants feel the need to develop a
form of “ethical sociality”, which is brought into being through various “mechanisms of materialization”. More specifically, the supply of images is vast, and given their digital qualities, an image can be shared with another person without it being lost to its original owner. There is thus no scarcity of images. Nonetheless, participants develop and enforce scarcity through a variety of social and technical means, including stigmatisation of the practice of leeching (downloading excessive amounts of images without reciprocation) and installation of programs to control supply of images according to predefined ratios of upload to download. As Slater describes it, life in the sexpics scene is dominated by concerns about how to maintain an appropriate social order, and this quest for social order forms a dominant way for participants to understand their experience.

In more traditional senses the sex pictures scene might be thought of as evading or ignoring regulation. Many of the images which are traded may be in breach of copyright, having been scanned from print publications or downloaded from commercial pornography sites. However, according to Slater’s description this does not mean that it is without regulation altogether. It forms its own sphere of sociality, realised through both social norms and technical devices, and developing appropriate forms of materialization for the virtual space in which it occurs. As Slater says in his conclusion:

...what I have been trying to emphasize is not the marginal or bizarre nature of the IRC sexpics scene, or its disembedded and virtual character. To the contrary what is interesting in this case is the participants’ great drive to normalize social life and to make it behave as if it were embedded in a reliable and transmissible normativity. (Slater 2002).

We could, then, consider this as a case where Internet governance and regulation, or at the very least some strongly policed conventions for use, arise from the bottom-up in an Internet context as enacted by Internet users.

While the particular upshot of self-regulation is somewhat unusual in the case that Slater describes, the point that virtual communities can self-regulate using a variety of social, legalistic and technical means is much more widely accepted. Online communities can, therefore, be considered as highly regulated in their own terms, although the resulting social structures and norms can vary widely from one another and may or may not mirror those prevailing in offline society. Even though it has been challenging to find practical ways to apply existing national legislative frameworks to the Internet and Internet communities have enjoyed relatively high levels of autonomy (Barzilai-Nahon and Neumann 2005), the Internet society that has emerged has been far from “anything goes”. Studies of online communities tend, however, to emphasize the bounded nature of virtual communities, and the importance of strong ties between at least a core of members in developing and maintaining a sense of a distinctive social locale. This perspective may be somewhat misleading as a representation of the way that many users view the Internet, as the next section will demonstrate.

X.3 Internet activities as a part of complex cultural dynamics
While studies of online community self-regulation tend to celebrate the apartness and integrity of the Internet, more recently it has been argued that the Internet is only rarely experienced as a separate sphere of virtuality, and that often it becomes woven into a set of connections that span online and offline contexts (Miller and Slater 2000; Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002). In the situation that Miller and Slater describe, use of the Internet by Trinidadians assumed a distinctively Trinidadian quality, such that users were able to recognise themselves in the technology and make it their own. It has become increasingly common for ethnographers to see Internet activity as woven into everyday life as the “embedded” Internet described by Howard (2004). This, then, provides an additional complication when we look at conventions of use and issues of Internet governance and regulation. If the Internet begins to dissolve as an unproblematically defined object, and if it acquires more complex and less predictable connections with various other contexts, it becomes harder to demarcate it for regulatory purposes. Medium-based regulation may not, after all, be an approach which sits comfortably with the mundane experience. In this section I will delve a little more deeply into this issue, drawing on some recent ethnographic projects.

Constable (2003) conducted an ethnography of the phenomenon of the “mail order bride”, exploring the experiences of women from China and the Philippines and men from the United States who were seeking foreign marriage partners. Her ethnography combined face-to-face interviews in the US, China and the Philippines with Internet observations focusing on mailing lists and web sites where potential partners interacted. This multi-sited approach enabled Constable to review the complex interactions between conventions in different settings. She describes the multiple allegiances of participants, such that rather than distinct communities, the various chat rooms, bulletin boards and mailing lists form “an array of social networks and alliances” (Constable 2003:34). Rather than seeing the Internet as a self-contained sphere independent of nation states Constable observed a more complex situation in which “the Internet community both traverses and reinforces state boundaries and definitions of citizenship” (Constable 2003:11). The Internet becomes a site where relations with nation states and also with prevailing gender conventions are reworked. Exploring participants’ experiences in online and offline settings allowed Constable to review the ways in which online activities are structured across diverse sites and are also a part of a wider whole, in which the conventions of any particular online site are suffused with concerns from other domains.

The transnational Internet experiences that Constable studied are not an isolated phenomenon. Panagakos and Horst (2006) discuss the experience of transnational migrants with the Internet, and find a similarly complex picture. They discuss five ethnographic case studies of the use of communications media by transnational migrants, and find that practices are highly variable and influenced by the situations from which migrants originate and in which they find themselves. The Internet is not experienced in isolation, but as part of an array of potential media which migrants may be able to use to keep in touch. Usage relates to practical and economic accessibility, and also to perceptions of the abilities of the media concerned to convey emotion and develop intimacy in specific cultural contexts. Panagakos and Horst (2006) stress the importance
of contextualising observations of Internet use, and not assuming that the Internet automatically provides a transnational sphere that bridges distance.

These studies of transnational Internet use therefore stress the ways in which online and offline are mutually interwoven. Online activities become part of a continuum of practice that spans online and offline sites, and the appropriate framework for judging acceptable behavior becomes a live question. In some cases the whole rationale for online activities revolves around an offline context towards which they are directed and upon which they are intended to have an impact. Constable’s potential marriage partners may have interacted online to begin with, but many hoped to make relationships which could some day transfer offline. They did participate in online groups that we could refer to as online communities. There were norms of behavior for the various mailing lists and websites that potential marriage partners used. Constable’s participants in this sense resembled Slater’s online sexpics traders, since each group develops a form of online sociality appropriate to its own goals without drawing upon generalized ideas of what an online forum should or could be. As Constable (2003: 235) says, “On all the lists, men policed and criticized one another openly.” Constable’s participants, however, have a somewhat different focus in the very strong pertinence that national governance regimes relating to citizenship and international mobility have for their purposes and much of their online activity was focused towards negotiating these regimes.

The Internet activities of Constable’s participants were not subject to national governance as such, but to the extent that some day they hoped to meet up with one another the potential marriage partners had to pay attention to immigration and citizenship legislation. Their activities oriented to, but posed no challenge to, national governance. Some forms of Internet activity can however be particularly difficult for formal regimes of governance to address and can be more challenging to the status quo. Yang (2006) describes such a situation in the case of political activity on the Internet in China. He diagnoses a rise in informational politics, which crosses between online and offline. China has both a highly regulated Internet and high levels of political activism via the Internet. The emergent conventions of Internet use by political activists both respond to and challenge official structures of governance. The uses made of the Internet by political activists to spread information between people and between digital and conventional mass media, and the specific ways in which this is achieved in “fluid, episodic and emergent” fashion are particularly resistant to state control. It is partly because the Internet networks of political communication are linked into offline networks and yet also spread internationally that they both have an influence on domestic governance and evade its control.

Viewed from this perspective, it appears that both the self-regulation of Internet activities, and the attempts by governments to regulate aspects of behavior in cyberspace, often need to be viewed as contextual phenomena which interweave online and offline frames of reference. The recent ethnographic studies described above find that meaning-making spans online and offline, and that frequently the appropriate standards of behavior are judged both by participants and onlookers according to frames which are not confined to the online realm. I began this chapter with a focus on emergent conventions for
Internet usage, suggesting that we need to look not simply at formal regulatory structures but also at the way that users of the Internet work with structures and expectations in practice in order to regulate their own behavior. The relevant structures and expectations may be drawn from diverse contexts in dynamics and flexible fashion. In the remainder of this section I pursue this perspective, considering the ways in which one group of users has claimed the Internet and made it its own and describing the origins of the forms of self-regulation which this group has come to practice in its online activities.

By contrast with the self-regulation of Internet-specific social formations such as online communities, a very different form of regulation is created by the interweaving of virtual and material in creation of sets of communication practices which are crafted to match the concerns of a particular group with a prior offline existence. An example that I have been examining recently is the use of the Internet by biologists engaged in the discipline of systematics, responsible for the classification and naming of organisms (Hine 2007; 2008). Internet use in this discipline can best be understood, I would argue, as part of a complex communication ecology, and as made meaningful through an existing material culture, set of institutional arrangements and political context. Whilst how to use the Internet is a frequent topic of debate in this field, it would be perverse to talk about regulating or governing the Internet as a separate domain from the rest of the discipline’s activities. The Internet is seen largely as another conduit through which to conduct the discipline’s business, and as such much of the effort has been directed towards incorporating the Internet into the existing structures of governance and self-regulation.

The most obvious aspect of systematics which is subject to governance is nomenclature. A set of nomenclatural codes specific to each major group of organisms have been in operation since the 19th century, to regulate nomenclatural processes. These nomenclatural codes dictate the steps which must be taken to ensure that a name has been validly published, and provide rules for the resolution of conflicts where more than one name has been published for the same group of organisms (whilst also allowing for differences of classificatory opinion). The nomenclatural codes aim to ensure stability of names through the principle of priority, which dictates that the earliest published name for a particular taxon will take precedence. Should the same taxon be described subsequently under a different name, that name will be held to be a junior synonym. The starting point for the priority rule varies between groups. For plants the starting point for priority is Species Plantarum published by Linnaeus in 1753. In the context of the nomenclatural codes, then, the qualities of the Internet have been interpreted through the lens of the discipline’s orientations towards its past. There is an understandable concern about the durability of a medium that has only been around a few years. The key focus for the particular form of regulation enacted in nomenclatural codes has been to ensure that modes of publication of new names are sufficiently durable to match up with the eighteenth century publications that systematists still use.

Whilst systematics have taken readily to the use of email and web sites for much of their routine communication, use of the Internet for the formal publication of names has taken much longer to become accepted. The revision of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature published in 2000 opened up the possibility for new names to be validly
published electronically, including via the Internet. However, publication was only to be considered valid if five identical copies of the electronic publication were to be made and lodged in five different libraries. The authors of the code were troubled by the possibility that electronic publications might not endure for a long time, and also that many forms of electronic publication were amenable to constant updating. Requiring the lodging of identical material copies in libraries was their way to permit the use of a medium which both systematists themselves and their users were increasingly keen to deploy, whilst keeping the fundamentals of the nomenclatural code intact.

As viewed from the historically sensitized perspective of the nomenclatural codes, then, the problem with the Internet was its ephemerality. Rules were introduced to supplement the Internet with other more durable media in order to meet the rigorous demands for enduring availability. This is not to say, however, that systematists always think of the Internet as an ephemeral medium. In a different context, there are concerns that the medium might also be too real. This specific point refers to the growing practice of making databases of specimens available on the Internet. There has been considerable political pressure for systematists to overcome geographic inequalities by making information available electronically. Substantial efforts have been focused on making the catalogues of specimen collections available online, and in developing large scale publicly available repositories of biodiversity information. One fear which this practice raises relates to the risk of making accessible what should otherwise be confined to expert gaze. The paper sheets on which herbarium specimens are mounted have traditionally been used by experts reviewing the specimens to make their own annotations. The possibility of making all of this information available online raises concerns that it might cause additional confusion, especially where annotations included new names not validly published elsewhere. Another concern about the powers of online information relates to the fear that unscrupulous collectors might be able to use specimen records to locate the sites where rare species were growing. The lack of control over audience forms one of the key regulatory fears of systematists, even while placing information online for wide audiences is one of the key political pressures on the field in current times.

Yet another way in which Internet activities are regulated with an eye to the wider concerns of the discipline relates to the use of online discussion forums. There is a discipline-wide mailing list, which is used as a forum for discussion of topical issues and as a venue for announcements. Throughout my research I drew on this list to keep abreast of the concerns of the discipline. I also conducted online interviews with participants to find out how they viewed its status, and how they felt about the messages they read and the contributions they themselves made. It emerged that many users of this list were quite conscious that this list provided a public forum in which reputations were at stake, and regulated their contributions accordingly. It was felt by many that despite the easy nature of online communication many of the conventions and the inequalities which prevailed in the discipline at large were also relevant in the online setting. Far from being a discrete social sphere, the mailing list was experienced as a place where the discipline was enacted. The list did have its own norms of behavior, and some sense of its own culture. It was, however, very much viewed as a disciplinary forum continuous with the rest of
the discipline. There was little formal regulation of list content, but users were highly conscious of the need to self-regulate.

A final sense in which there was self-regulation of Internet usage relates to the institutional perspective. There is a considerable political pressure on systematists to be seen to modernize, and to respond to global concerns with biodiversity conservation by making information accessible in timely fashion. Individual institutions are held accountable for their use of the Internet by funding bodies and governments. In signing the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity national governments committed themselves to sharing relevant information with other signatories. As a part of this commitment, national governments have in turn reviewed the activities of the institutions which generate and curate the information. In the UK, a House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology reviewed the state of the discipline in relation to the UK’s responsibilities under the Convention on Biological Diversity (Select Committee on Science and Technology 2002). There was considerable discussion of Internet activities, focusing explicitly both on their practical advantages and their symbolic qualities in demonstrating the discipline’s willingness to modernize. Systematics institutions are consequently conscious that Internet activities have a significance which exceeds the online domain. Internet activities do not remain online, but are packaged and re-presented for other audiences as evidence of appropriate kinds of engagement with contemporary concerns.

It is clear, then, that for the systematics community the Internet is not an autonomous domain, but forms an intrinsic part of disciplinary identity and the continuing efforts to maintain the discipline’s status and fundability. At the same time, there is continual reference to core concerns such as stability of nomenclature and a concern that transfer to the Internet should not threaten the integrity of established systems. Political pressures to innovate are balanced against concerns to maintain valued aspects of existing forms of regulation. Self-regulation is manifested both at the level of institutions concerned to maintain appropriate kinds of Internet activity and at the individual level of systematists concerned to use the Internet in ways that enhance rather than damaging reputation.

In the context of the sexpics trading described by Slater (2002), maintenance of an ethical social order was a constant topic and obsession for those participating. In systematics, the coming of the Internet has provided a reflexive opportunity across the discipline, to discuss not only appropriate ways of publishing information, but also deeper issues of the responsibilities of the discipline, the political conditions within which it finds itself operating and the nature of its audiences. Discussing what ought to be done in the face of the new medium has become a wide-ranging reflexive opportunity in which many systematists have participated, and all the major systematics institutions have felt obliged to engage. Frames of reference for judging appropriate activities are highly variable, spanning from the conventions of a particular mailing list to the concerns of global politics. Whilst in some cases the outcomes do fit quite closely with previous structures of regulation, such as the nomenclatural codes, in other instances the emergent practice is less predictable from past experience.
It is thus not clear in advance what qualities any particular community will see in the Internet, nor how they will choose to exploit them. The emergent conventions of use draw variably on a range of concerns, including the need to project desirable identities both in the detail of one’s use and in being seen to use the technology in appropriate ways. Particular aspects of culture and history may predispose communities towards seeing their own versions of the promise and perils of the Internet, and they will also develop highly specific forms of governance to address the situation that they encounter. This perspective aligns with the position on Internet governance described by Malaby (2006). In his introduction to a special issue of First Monday focusing on Internet governance he suggests that it needs to be viewed as a process rather than a set of rules, and that this perspective should entail “a recognition that contingency is always a factor for actors as they seek to apply existing practices to new circumstances”.

X.4 Conclusion

Studies of online communities suggest that the Internet is far from being viewed by its users as in need of a strong regulatory influence from nation states or international bodies. The distinctive sets of norms and diverse resources for self-regulation which online groups have deployed suggest, rather, that users have been able to develop for themselves such regulatory influences as they need to keep their online experiences fruitful and enjoyable. Whilst some forms of user-centric (Dutton and Peltu 2007) governance issues such as spam or fraud remain less amenable to community-based self-regulation, the broad issue of unacceptable behavior is one that autonomous online communities have tackled repeatedly. The resources available to online communities to police unacceptable behavior include social means such as chastising or flaming wrongdoers and developing overt codes of conduct, technical response which delete inappropriate material and exclude offenders, and appeals to offline authorities or legislation. Online self-regulation is mature and often highly effective, although it can be problematic for state governance where the online orthodoxy transgresses offline norms and legal frameworks.

Whilst online communities may provide a strong case for the self-regulatory capacities of the Internet, it is however important to be aware that this model encompasses only a small part of the Internet experience. Many Internet users are not part of such sustained social formations, and their Internet use becomes meaningful through its embedding within other aspects of their lives. As described in Section X.3, Internet activities can form a part of complex social dynamics and the model of the autonomous online community can be rather misleading for understanding the ways in which groups with an offline identity or referent self-regulate. The systematists whom I describe participate in some activities which might be described as online communities, and in those contexts they develop norms of behavior which are both specific to that online community and draw upon the wider norms of the discipline. Their efforts to use the Internet as a medium for publishing new material are mediated through both the existing rules covering valid publication and their understanding of the capacities and challenges posed by the Internet. Use of the Internet is to some extent regulated through existing frameworks, but the coming of the Internet provides an opportunity for examining and reinterpreting those frameworks. It is an issue for debate and often controversy just how far, and in what
circumstances, aspects of existing practice should transfer to the new domain of the Internet.

The examples of ethnographic enquiry that I describe above make clear that the appropriate uses of the Internet are not to be read from the technology alone. Nor are they to be read directly from the context of use, if by context we mean a particular online forum or offline social group, since the relevance of particular contexts is enacted in the moment and through the social dynamics of use by particular collectives. Socially sanctioned uses emerge dynamically, and this can lead to problems where social sanctioning processes do not come to the same conclusions: a parent, for example, might be highly disturbed to find that the child they were attempting to save from self-harming has found a peer group on the Internet which celebrated and encouraged such actions. Conventions for Internet use arise from the bottom-up through particular circumstances of use, but the relevance of contexts for determining those conventions is also dynamically defined. Whilst sometimes the Internet may be viewed as a relatively autonomous sphere, as may particular online communities within the Internet, in other lights the Internet can be seen as an embedded feature of contemporary society and continuous with quite different regulatory frameworks. The Internet is both a cultural context in its own right and a cultural artefact (Hine 2000). It is important, therefore, to consider not just the ways in which regulation arises within Internet culture, but to examine also the assumptions about what the Internet is and should be that inform our views of how it should be regulated.

Taking this point back to the issue of understanding self-regulation of Internet behavior, it is clear that it is misleading to aggregate “Internet behavior” as if it were all one phenomenon, and that we cannot judge in advance which contexts will drive the judgements of users about unacceptable behavior and appropriate Internet use. This makes clear that it may be mistaken to speak of Internet governance and regulation as if it were a thing unproblematically set apart from other forms of governance and regulation. In line with recent writings in sociology of technology, we can think of technologies as having a fluid quality (de Laet and Mol 2000) which makes drawing their identities and boundaries problematic. Framing the issue in this way, it becomes relevant to ask what the object is that we plan to regulate. If, in the everyday experience, the Internet is not always marked out as a discrete object, but is instead suffused with and embedded in the diverse concerns of everyday life, it becomes harder to make specific regimes of regulation and governance stick. National regimes of governance are made to adhere in large part through border controls, which ensure that everyone knows for most practical purposes when they are in a country and thus which regimes of governance and regulation concern them. Marking out a specific sphere of Internet governance and regulation suggests the operation of similar border controls to ensure that everyone knows when they come under that jurisdiction. Ethnographic evidence suggests that marking out the Internet as an object of governance and regulation in this way goes against much of the commonplace experience of this technology. The experience of the Internet is both more particular, in that each online community may have its own norms, and more diffuse, in that we often do not particularly think of “going on to the Internet” when we send an email, check a website or make an online purchase.
This is not to say, however, that the ambiguous nature of the Internet and the multiple social formations which it enables and inhabits are to be managed away, or undermine the project of regulation altogether. Ethnographic evidence suggests that individuals and collectives seek to develop an ordering in their Internet interactions as in other spheres of their lives. The apparent novelty of the Internet, and its separation from more familiar forms of materiality and communication provides an occasion for reflexive thinking. The systematics community that I studied discussed how the Internet could be used to further their goals in a way that sustained the principles that were important to them. In the process, they found that they were required to specify often for the first time and in new ways exactly what it was that they did and what their principles were. New technologies, and in particular, technologies like the Internet which are viewed as somewhat challenging to the existing social order, provide an opportunity for quite wide-ranging reflection on goals, principles and practices. This reflexive opportunity is, I would suggest, one of the key strengths of the Internet as far as regulation and governance are concerned. The interesting opportunity is to use our doubts about what and where the Internet is to deepen debates about appropriate ways of ordering social life, and it would be mistaken to attempt to close down on that opportunity too quickly.

There is evidence that the reflexive opportunity offered by the ambiguity of the Internet is not confined to discrete groups, such as the systematics community that I described. On the international stage it remains problematic to define exactly what Internet governance should be and what the objects are that require to be governed (Hofmann 2007). MacLean (2004) described the tendency in some circles to close down on issues of Internet governance as relating specifically to the allocation of addresses and domain names. Opposing that tendency, he describes various efforts to open up debate around issues of development and equitable access to the Internet in an inclusive information society. These conscious efforts to widen debate, and to render the issue one of global politics have made available a space for a reflexive examination of prevailing inequalities. As Bendrath et al (2007) suggest, the Internet is the ultimate symbol of globalization, and it is as such that its coming has offered a chance to examine afresh and debate the role of the nation state and the prevailing inequalities between nations. Hofmann (2007) argues that to make a claim about the “problem” of Internet governance is also to make a preliminary decision about the institutions and actors who are to be involved. In recent developments she suggests that the debates around Internet governance have become a domain for experimenting with ideas about democracy and the nation state. Whether or not there is anything inherent in the Internet which has the power to transform the role of the state in social control, the levels of debate which it engenders may be in themselves transformative within global society.

References


