

# **Beyond the Digital Divide into Computer-Mediated Communications: A Content Analysis of the Role of Community Weblogs in building Oldenburg's Virtual "Third Places" in Black America**

## ***Introduction***

Although times change, there are certain human elements that survive through the ages. These elements include the need for expression, companionship, involvement, connection and information. The avenues by which humans engage in these social practices have evolved, and with the dawn of the Information Age we are seeing the emergence of new forms of computer mediated communication (CMC), with weblogs (or blogs) being a manifestation of this transformation. Some argue that within the on going information age in American society, no single individual is disconnected or separated from others due to the existence and prevalence of Information Communicative Technologies (ICT). These technologies have proved to be indispensable and are critical to communication between individuals, cultures and communities within the larger American society (Milne 2004).

This paper deals with these Information and Communicative Technologies, more specifically how weblogs (or blogs) are used by African Americans on the positive side of the digital divide to participate in virtual communities to rebuild communicative aspects of community that have been lost in "real-world" communities. In addition, the paper will determine whether these virtual communities fit the description of "third places" as portrayed by Oldenburg (Oldenburg 1999). These "third places" arise out of a need for individuals to find a dependable, neutral place of refuge to gather and interact, away from first places (home) and second places (work), often conferring or dealing with issues that may considered too taboo for public discussion by the community at large.

With this in mind the researcher identified an issue within the African American community that was of consequence, and yet was not being addressed due to individual or social pressures. The problem that presented itself was the lack of discussion and social support pertaining to the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

#### *African American HIV/AIDS Statistics*

HIV/AIDS statistics paint a particularly disturbing picture for African American females, due to the fact that they account for a disproportionate number of infections relative to other social groups (Phillips 2005), and 75% of new HIV/AIDS cases within the larger African American population. The Center for Disease Control (CDC), states that HIV/AIDS is among the top 4 causes of death for African American women aged 25–54 years, and the number 1 cause of death for African American women aged 25–34 years (CDC 2006). In 2001, HIV/AIDS was among the top three causes of death for African American men 25-54 years of age, and of persons diagnosed with AIDS since 1995, a smaller percentage of African Americans (60%) were alive after nine years compared with whites (70%) (due in part to late diagnosis) (Health 2007). Despite these figures, there is still a deafening silence associated with the discussion of the disease, because contraction of the HIV virus is seen as a consequence of behaviors that are stigmatized within the largely religious and conservative African American community (i.e., promiscuity, homosexuality, or drug use), framed within the context of sin and immorality (Baker 1999).

#### *Communities and Expression*

An interesting element of any functional community is that it is self-sustaining. In order to be self-sustaining a community has to possess the ability to address issues that affect

members' wellbeing, in either a direct or indirect fashion, to ensure that what members are getting out of the association exceeds the cost. Every healthy community discusses issues that threaten its survival. However, the number of African Americans infected and dying from HIV/AIDS is staggering, and the silence associated with the epidemic is akin to having "an elephant in the room" that nobody wants to talk about. This conflict, and the fear of violating group discussion norms, has created a prevalent silence on the subject, and degraded aspects of community, namely: emotional safety, sense of belonging, and positive reinforcement found in dialogue.

It is believed that in an effort to "heal" itself of this silence, and restore aforementioned communicative elements of community that have been diminished, African Americans have resorted to finding other outlets to discuss the epidemic. One outlet is believed to be found in online third places. Blogs were chosen because they represent a single place, outside of large social gatherings, where people can engage in real time conversations on a grand scale, and unlike their physical counterparts, users are empowered by the relative cloak of anonymity afforded by the internet. Never before has a medium such as ICT existed that can connect and enable conversations from members representing all classes of the community, with potentially everyone able to contribute to the discussion and be heard. By technology being an enabler for rebuilding aspects of community, it adds impetus to the drive towards eliminating the "digital-divide" through tangible benefits, such as improved health outcomes through preventative, rather than reactive, practices.

#### *Oldenburg's "Third Places"*

The silence associated with HIV/AIDS by traditional African American institutions created a need to form social bonds in other arenas. This need provided fertile conditions for the

rise of an alternate place to gather and discuss transcendent issues; such places are typically born out of a need, and can be labeled as “third places”. Every *stable* community is comprised of a first place (home), a second place (work), and a third place (informal gathering location). If one of these components is missing, it affects the stability of the community (Baker-Eveleth, Eveleth et al. 2005). The third place (bars, cafes, barbershops, etc.) provides a context for sociability, spontaneity, community building and emotional expressiveness” (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982).

Ray Oldenburg states that third places are sought out by individuals because the function it serves is missing from their lives; more specifically, a lack of community poisons an individual’s sense of well being (Baker-Eveleth, Eveleth et al. 2005), and people will seek an exogenous source to fill that void if needed. Within the framework of computer mediated communication there has been a realization that cyberspace (such as blogs, chatrooms, etc.) resemble types of social settings described by Oldenburg, providing an informal place where individuals gather to rebuild communicative aspects of community that may be lost (Soukup 2006).

### *The Nature of Third Places*

The most important characteristic of third places is that they unite a neighborhood, and act as a “mixer”. They bring together a wide range of individuals from various backgrounds, and within this mix individuals find others who share their same interest, or find others who do not share their interests but are still considered interesting, and viable candidates for future associations later on. Third places are places where members discuss politics, philosophy, geography, urban development, psychology, history and many other topics,

and these dialogs offer an opportunity to flesh questions out, sound out protests, and to form opinions (Baker-Eveleth, Eveleth et al. 2005).

Third places are a political force to be reckoned with, and in times of crisis or of social upheavals, the seeds are often planted and watered in third place locales. Examples include the anti-labor segregation laws in the 1960's, which were the result of assembly of blacks in churches all over the south. Other examples include labor solidarity which emerged in many communities after workers met in local cafés, discussed their common problems, and realized their collective strength, which enabled them to effectively plan strikes and other strategies (Oldenburg 1999). Oldenburg describes the essential characteristics of third places as (Oldenburg 1999; Soukup 2006)<sup>1</sup>:

1. Being on neutral ground
2. Being levelers
3. Conversation being the main activity, with the mood being playful
4. Accessible
5. Are a home away from home, and have “regulars”

#### *African American Virtual Third Places*

Research has found that there is indeed a vibrant community of Black bloggers (Poole 2005) that is known as the “Blackosphere”, as described by Francis Hollander (2007):

*These blogs are by and principally for Black people, focusing not only upon Black people but upon people and issues deemed relevant to the Black people who write these blogs and post comments. At Black blogs, we comment on the issues of the day raised in white newspapers and blogs, but we also highlight issues that whites mostly ignore.*

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<sup>1</sup> See Oldenburg (1999) for a comprehensive review of Third Places

The research in this paper focuses on one of these sites found in the blackosphere, and addresses a basic question:

*How, and if so why, does the Weblog under study exhibit characteristics of “third places” as conceptualized by Oldenburg (1999)?*

Preliminary empirical findings from research of this “Blackosphere” reveals that there are indeed a significant number of individuals within the African American community that utilize blog sites to discuss the crisis of HIV/AIDS within the African American community. These blogs are a place where rich conversations take place, which helps increase community cohesiveness and emotional wellbeing as participants realize that they were not alone in dealing with the ramifications of the disease running rampant in the community (Igwe 2007 Forthcoming). The research lends credence to the belief that the importance of studying technology lies in the uniqueness of the social interactions the internet inspires, and not strictly for its technological attributes.

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