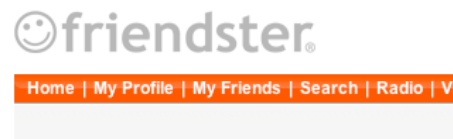


**Case Study #3**  
**Carsie's Network:**  
*Connecting a Geographically Dispersed Population*

**Introduction**

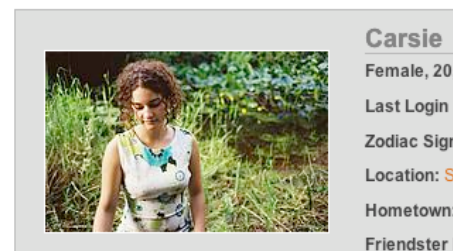
I've chosen this case study in order to highlight the interactions within the geographically dispersed population of unschoolers. Here, I analyze the role of virtual community and real life community as negotiated through various media forms and face-to-face interactions.

I analyze the ways in which unschoolers build networks of their own, since they don't rely upon larger institutionalized mechanisms for connection to other people and resources, whether for information or companionship. The author of the *Teenage Liberation Handbook*, Grace Llewellyn started *Not Back to School Camp*. I use her handbook and *NBTSC* as valuable examples of the intersection of real life and online community for young unschoolers. Much of the unschoolers' conceptualizations of these practices relate to ideas of Ivan Illich and the print precedent of John Holt's *Growing Without Schooling* magazine.



**Background**

During one of those amazing moments in which work and leisure collide, I was searching on Friendster.com, a very popular social networking site, when I made an unschooling connection. Because Friendster allows you to search people's interests by keyword, I was in essence, fishing for "unschoolers." I found and ended up contacting quite a few young people. I met Carsie, a twenty-year-old



unschooler, this way. If we ever meet in person, I'll probably only recognize her youthful face, rimmed with brown curls, by the photos in her profile.<sup>1</sup> Carsie spent her childhood in rural Virginia unschooling with her stay-at-home mom and author dad. She now resides in Eugene, Oregon where she works as a grant-writer at an alternative school for at-risk youth called Wellsprings Friends School.<sup>2</sup>

As Carsie and I corresponded, she invited me to be a virtual friend on Friendster and MySpace. MySpace is another vastly popular social networking website, distinguished from Friendster in its emphasis on flexible ways of sharing media. On MySpace, you have more options to customize your page. Many young people use the website, in fact, as a way to showcase their talents. Bands have MySpace accounts dedicated to their music, where visitors can stream their mp3s directly through the page, download photos, find out about shows, and often click to websites selling Cds. Not only did I learn from Carsie's MySpace profile that she's a folk musician, but I also listened to her songs right there.<sup>3</sup> "Myspace has been incredible - I've sold three CDs to total strangers who found me randomly on myspace, plus I've gotten a ton of wonderful comments and messages from strangers. It's such a pleasant surprise."<sup>4</sup> MySpace exemplifies a new wave in grassroots media distribution.

## **Talking through and about Grassroots Networks**

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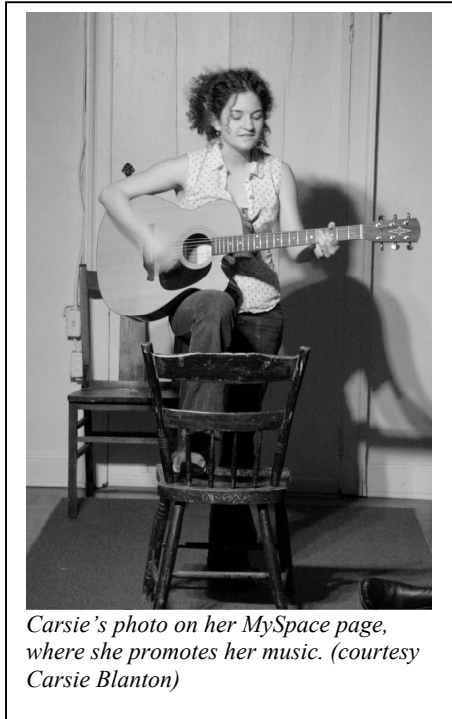
<sup>1</sup> After I'd used Friendster's search function to look for people who listed unschooling as an interest. I sent Carsie a message through Friendster explaining my project and gave her my email address, saying if she'd be interested in doing an interview, she should contact me. She got right back to me and within a few days, we were doing an interview over the phone. I think prompt response is a feature of these social networking websites. People are instantly associated and contextualized, rather than "cold-call emails" which are more out of the blue.

<sup>2</sup> Wellsprings Friends School, <http://www.wellspringsfriends.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> She's quite good! <http://www.myspace.com/carsieblanton>.

<sup>4</sup> Email from Carsie on April 12, 2006.

During our phone interview in March 2006, I mentioned to Carsie that I'd recently been in Vancouver visiting Matt Hern and The Purple Thistle, the unschooling youth center he helps to run. Carsie, exclaimed, "No way! I just called him right before you called. I wanted to ask you, do you know about Quo Vadis?"<sup>5</sup> I said no, I hadn't heard of it. "Oh this is exciting!... Quo Vadis is four years old. It started out as a gathering for unschoolers and now it's a gathering for lifelong learners, so they've kind of broadened the scope. It was started by young adults who went to Grace's camp, who still wanted to get together and network, forty to sixty young adults, mostly in their 20s and 30s. We try to get guests to come give lecture and workshops. So this year we're trying to get Matt Hern. I want you to



*Carsie's photo on her MySpace page, where she promotes her music. (courtesy Carsie Blanton)*

come too!"<sup>6</sup> Carsie taps into the geographically dispersed unschooling network and knows who's who and the latest goings-on. In fact, she plays an active part in negotiating the hybrids between virtual space (Friendster, MySpace, the Quo Vadis website, Craigslist) and real life (the Quo Vadis event, *Not Back to School Camp*, her performances, her work, meeting people through Craigslist).<sup>7</sup> Carsie reflects on networks in her life and the unschooling subculture, "Network theory is actually a major interest of mine. It's worth saying that much of the unschooling community is based on

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<sup>5</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Carsie points out that Craigslist is all about anti-consumerist reuse through social connections. I think this falls in line with the unschooling philosophy.

social networks in the first place, because of Not Back to School Camp and Quo Vadis. The group of people I'm living with now met at NBTSC, as well as several other community houses (Portland, Austin.) Unschoolers tend to travel in packs, literally, and often go on road trips or bike tours together.”<sup>8</sup> Unschooling connections have a large presence in her real life social network. Though she’s on Friendster and MySpace and uses the web, she admits to feeling ambivalent about it: “Especially with chatting and MySpace. It’s a compulsive thing.”<sup>9</sup> My analysis in this case study, then, looks at unschoolers’ perceptions of the positive and negative affordances of these online and real life networks.

Carsie described her childhood as somewhat lonely. As a rural unschooler, she said most of her friends when she was little were other homeschoolers, but most of them homeschooling for religious reasons. Pausing, she told me she considers herself an *unschooler* and checked in to make sure I knew the difference. “My family and I, we’re atheists...I started to realize that my homeschooling friends didn’t have the same beliefs as I did. And that started to feel important. But even when I went to public school in rural Virginia, it wasn’t such an improvement.”<sup>10</sup> Carsie gave school a try for a year when she was twelve. She didn’t find what she was looking for socially in “public school, where [she] didn't like or connect with the majority of the people.”<sup>11</sup> But things were about to change at the age of thirteen.

During our interview, Carsie recounted the story of a woman who called up her mother on the telephone one day in 1995 when Carsie was about ten. The woman wanted

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<sup>8</sup> Email from Carsie on April 12, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Email from Carsie on April 12, 2006.

to order a copy of Carsie's dad's book.<sup>12</sup> It turned out to be unschooling author Grace Llewellyn on the phone, and as Carsie told me, "she's been a family friend ever since. I've been going to *Not Back to School Camp* or a counselor there ever since. I'm actually having dinner with Grace tonight."<sup>13</sup> At the age of thirteen, Carsie first went to Grace Llewellyn's *Not Back to School Camp*, an unstructured summer program for unschoolers from around the country. Carsie's mom had read Llewellyn's *Teenage Liberation Handbook* and found it inspiring.<sup>14</sup> "Then Grace came to a Radical Honesty convention [put on by Carsie's father] the following year, and that's when I first heard about camp. The first year I went, my mom was a counselor, which I think made me more comfortable with going. I made a lot of very close friends very fast - friends I kept in touch with throughout the year, so I think it made it easier for me to be at home. My reaction to the campers was immediately WOW - I had never felt so overwhelmed with awe by a group of people."<sup>15</sup> Clearly, Carsie found the community of unschoolers at *NBTSC* to be her real community. The initial link to this authentic, yet constructed community centers on Llewellyn's book and also, the human connections that surround it. Indeed, the book has had a generative effect for many unschoolers: it has become a common mediating thread between unschoolers around the country. Given the importance unschoolers place on experiential-social learning in the physical world (as described in Case Studies #1 and #2), the camp is a brilliant idea. Its importance to the campers and to the unschooling subculture can't be underestimated.

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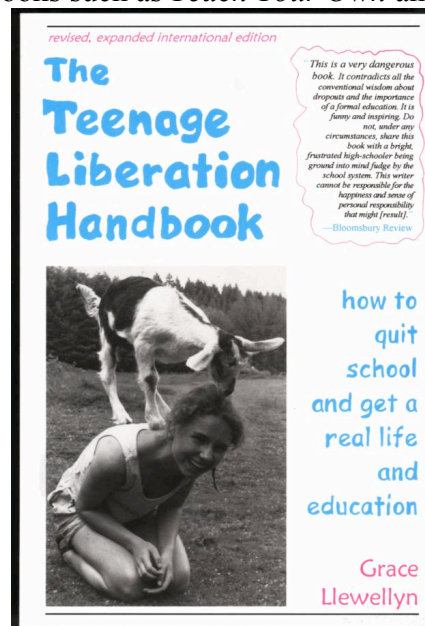
<sup>12</sup> Carsie's dad is gestalt psychologist Brad Blanton, author of *Practicing Radical Honesty* and *Radical Parenting*.

<sup>13</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.

<sup>14</sup> It's telling that Carsie didn't read the *Teenage Liberation Handbook* until later. In a way, she didn't need it: she was already unschooling. Llewellyn's book most often serves as a tool for dropping out and tuning in.

<sup>15</sup> Email from Carsie on April 12, 2006.

I asked Carsie about the importance of Llewellyn’s book to the unschooling subculture. “What the community is founded on and the biggest networking tool we all have are the books. That’s why we all have a word for it. Grace’s book, especially, and the camp that came out of the book has brought together hundreds of teenagers and it’s been pretty major in our lives.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the informal canon of books came up again and again in speaking with my informants: Llewellyn’s *Teenage Liberation Handbook*, David Guterson’s *Family Matters*, John Taylor Gatto’s *The Underground History of American Education*, Illich’s *Deschooling Society*, John Holt’s books such as *Teach Your Own* and *After Education*, as well as his magazine *Growing Without Schooling*. Such titles appear on “favorite books” lists on unschooling blogs. Unschooling old-timers recommend them to newcomers, just as they recommended them to me when I was starting my research. “John Holt is my hero!” Roberto, an unschooling dad in California, told me. “*Family Matters*, I gave that one to my parents. It’s not that they were against us unschooling, I think they just didn’t really get it.”<sup>17</sup> The practice of



giving a book in this case is not just gifting or loaning: Roberto gave the book to his parents in an attempt to mediate the tricky interfamilial situation. Roberto used the book that he’d plucked as a newcomer from the resources of the network of recommendations by old-timer unschoolers. In this way, the mediated network—that cloud of canon books, blogs, and people—intersected with Rob’s very personal, real life relationship with his

<sup>16</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.

<sup>17</sup> Phone interview with Roberto, October 28, 2005.

father. In order to convince their disapproving relatives that they're not ruining their children's lives, some unschoolers paraphrase from books and pro-unschooling arguments they find online.<sup>18</sup>

I've noticed that many of the unschoolers I've interviewed mention Llewellyn's book *Teenage Liberation Handbook* as an entry point into unschooling paradigm-shift, as I discussed in the *Introduction to the Five Unschooling Case Studies*. It's almost like an initiation rite of passage. But what makes the form and function of such a media artifact so useful to unschoolers? Llewellyn publishes the *Teenage Liberation Handbook* through her own independent company, Lowry House. The current edition has a memorable, informal snapshot of a girl kneeling in the grass with a goat standing on her back. The image conjures notions of back-to-the-land country life and quirky, liberal identity.<sup>19</sup> Carsie told me her roommate Tilke is redesigning the cover for the next edition. I was surprised, given how recognizable the current cover is. The new one is "hand painted with grass and trees. We talked a lot about what the book means, what the cover should represent. Its main function is as a *handbook*. She drafted different things, but it looked like a truck mechanic handbook or something."<sup>20</sup> The book—as a media object—expresses the form and function of a classic unschooling text. To put it bluntly,

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<sup>18</sup> Bakhtin referred to this practice as "ventriloquation," which "presupposes that a voice is never solely responsible for creating an utterance or its meaning. It begins with the fact that 'the word in language is half someone else's.'" (p.70 James Wertsch quoting Mikhail Bakhtin in *Voices of the Mind: Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action*). I find the choice of the word "ventriloquation" unfortunate because it has the negative connotations of parroting. I do find this concept useful in the unschooling subculture in which I often heard paraphrasing—sometimes on a subconscious level and sometimes attributed—of the major canon of unschooling texts as well as bits of online chats. This type of speech genre, "talking points" really, has entered a new era of dissemination with new media.

<sup>19</sup> I discuss DIY aesthetics further in the fifth case study. When I asked Carsie if she thought the *Handbook's* DIY aesthetics were intentionally designed, she said she hadn't thought of it this way. She asked Grace who said she hadn't consciously designed the book to express these aesthetics. Rather, the book just *is* homespun and unassuming. For me, this reveals the nature of DIY aesthetics, which derive from a hands-on practice, rather than the trumped up design of publishing houses. On the page in the *Handbook* with the copyright information, Llewellyn includes: "All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any manner whatsoever, including photocopying, except in the case of graffiti on bathroom walls and brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews...Cover photo by Beth Crawford: unschooler/poet/barn builder/goatherd Josanna Crawford, and Raison the goat."

<sup>20</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.

the typesetting looks amateurish in that DIY way. In his book *No More Prisons*, Billy Upski Wimsatt describes his first personal encounter with the *Handbook*:

“So one summer day three years ago, I was in a little bookstore in Portland, Oregon called Reading Frenzy and I asked the owner, Chloe Eudaly, what her favorite books were. She didn’t even have to think about it. ‘That one!’ she said. She pointed to a self-published book with crude red and green illustrations. Its title? *The Teenage Liberation Handbook: How to Quit School and Get a Real Life and Education* by Grace Llewellyn... [I]f Grace Llewellyn was so self-educated, how come her book looked so amateurish and why hadn’t I heard of it before... In retrospect, maybe I was a little bit threatened.”<sup>21</sup>

While Grace Llewellyn says that the DIY aesthetics weren’t intentional—in that kind of

art-directed marketing kind

of way—the design of the

book springs organically

from the subculture. For

people like Carsie and

Wimsatt, the book’s



A screenshot of the NBTSC LiveJournal community.

connectedness to their everyday lives—how they first accessed it, how they passed it

on—is part of its allure.

Implicit to unschooling is the way a media artifact, such as the *Handbook*, moves

through this peer-to-peer and underground, independent network. Let’s unpack the

network supporting the *Handbook*:

1. Llewellyn self-publishes the book through her company Lowry House.
2. She distributes it via her website and through the mail.
3. It’s carried by independent bookstores in which customers get personal opinions from the staff.

<sup>21</sup> P.60 *No More Prisons: Urban Life, Homeschooling, Hip-Hop Leadership, The Cool Rich Kids Movement, A Hitchhiker's Guide to Community Organizing, and Why Philanthropy is the Greatest Art Form of the 21st Century*. Wimsatt, who advocates for self-education and urban youth through hip-hop culture, wrote this handbook in 1999. I actually first encountered the phrase “No More Prisons” as graffiti tags on the sidewalks of almost any city I visited. As an urban form of grassroots media, graffiti expressed far more than just Wimsatt’s message. It was part of the vernacular that gave his message weight. He currently works as a political activist in NYC for the *League of Pissed Off Voters*. <http://www.indyvoter.org/>

4. It has no corporate advertising budget but rather gets referenced and talked up by unschoolers themselves, through their real life and online networks, and in the case of Wimsatt, other unschooling books such as *No More Prisons*.
5. The *Handbook* gains a following to the point where Llewellyn starts the *Not Back to School Camp* for unschoolers.
6. *NBTSC* campers start a wiki and LiveJournal through which they stay in touch and spread the word about other unschooling websites, books, other media, and events such as *Quo Vadis*.

This exercise reveals the way the unschooling network works through grassroots modes to not only support media objects and unschoolers, but also reinforces the DIY, Indy identity of the unschooling subculture. More and more such real life nodes of these networks— independent bookstores for example—are under threat from corporate competition. For those people who don't live in pockets of liberal America—Ithaca, NY, say, or Berkeley, CA—online networks tune them in to unschooling.

What about these online networks is unschoolish? Online networks flourish in



part because they're relatively cheap, once you have the computer and Internet access.<sup>22</sup>

They also connect people like Katie, an unschooling mom who lives in a small town in Louisiana. Katie feels a strong pull to "community" online, because she doesn't connect culturally, ideologically with her mostly conservative neighbors. I met Katie through flickr.com, an online, socially networked photo-sharing site for amateur photographers. I found an unschooling group on flickr; members add photos and stories about unschooling to the group pool. One such photo—titled "Navigating"—shows Katie's daughter Evyn

<sup>22</sup> As I mentioned in the *Introduction* to this thesis, unschoolers are predominantly middleclass and live thrifty lives, largely due to the fact that one parent often stays home.

holding up a map. Katie bypasses her real life place and opts for an online space with others who are of a like mind. One of my informants, Roberto, actually found *me* through the tagging I'd been doing on flickr.com and del.icio.us—"unschooling" and "thesis," and he contacted me out of curiosity.<sup>23</sup> Over the course of our correspondence, he sent me many other links—which effectively served as points of entry into unschooling networks. Mediated communication through these networks plays an integral part in shaping the identity and practice of unschoolers, especially those who feel isolated in their real lives.

Online networks and especially chat groups offer information, but simultaneously make connections to other people who can speak from their experiences. For many unschoolers, this is instrumental in initiating unschooling. Joyce, an unschooling mother in the Boston area describes how she first went through the paradigm-shift and decided to unschool: "When Kathryn was 4 and in preschool, I used the free AOL trial software with the new computer and discovered the homeschooling forums. That was the turning point for me... unless Kathryn thought whatever I chose was fun, I was left with options that involved making her which clashed with my goal of enjoying learning. The only homeschoolers focused on joy who spoke positively of their children were the unschoolers. The problem was that I didn't trust that they cared about academics. But they were a lot more fun to hang around with and read than the curriculum administrators! And since the unschoolers were fun I stuck around long enough to finally get what unschooling was about."<sup>24</sup> As a newcomer, Joyce learned from the experiences of old-

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<sup>23</sup> The fourth case study further discusses the interplay between my unschooling informants and myself as the researcher. I'm particularly interested in reciprocal modes of introduction, researching and interviewing. My del.icio.us links for example became part of a collectively built archive using the tag "unschooling."

<sup>24</sup> February 19, 2006 email interview with Joyce.

timers.<sup>25</sup> She became initiated into the subcultural identity of this community of practice by navigating the unschooling networks.

An important precedent of current unschooling networks, John Holt's self-published magazine *Growing Without Schooling* first came out in 1977. Present day unschooling networks function in similar ways: both include hybrids of print-based and face-to-face communications; texts weave non-hierarchical, asynchronous conversations; the tone is informal; there's no one officially in charge. John Holt, when he was alive in the early days of the movement (he died in 1985), served as an unofficial spokesman and focal point of the movement. Surely, Holt would roll over in his grave if someone ever said that he'd "been in control" of the unschooling movement. The very structure of the *GWS* magazine, I believe, is formative and representative of unschooling networks. The magazine consisted of a mix of articles, letters from readers and commentary by Holt and Associates, organized in a nonhierarchical way, blurring the distinction between reader and writer. The authors of these letters largely wrote from personal experiences and thus constituted a vernacular theory of practice. The speech genres were consciously vernacular, anti-professional and accessible. Books and other media are often infused with a DIY philosophy. "Pat Farenga... used to run a home-schoolers' bookstore in Cambridge, Mass. He says that his store's best sellers always included Noah Blake's 1805 book, 'The Diary of an Early American Boy'--which described old-fashioned crafts like nail-making and shingle-splitting. A more recent illustrated edition has been popular 'because it has all these beautifully drawn pictures of how to do things before

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<sup>25</sup> We can see Joyce's experiences as a form of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's *legitimate peripheral participation*, in which she gradually becomes more familiar with the practices of the community through social participation with more experienced people.

technology.”<sup>26</sup> Not unlike Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*, *GWS*' form and content reflected its community of producer-consumers, not unlike blogs today, and yet the legitimacy of technology is always up for debate.

*GWS*' linguistic style infused the network with an accessibility that transferred to real life. As *GWS*' subscriptions grew, Holt and Associates started publishing a directory of its geographically dispersed population of subscribers, who used it for hosting traveling unschoolers. In a way, this is a print version of networking we see online today. The public libraries and unschooling conventions—such as *Learning in Our Own Way* conference and the *Live and Learn* conference—become real life spatial nodes for unschoolers.<sup>27</sup> When I interviewed her, Katie was looking forward to meeting friends she'd met online for the first time face-to-face at the upcoming *Live and Learn* conference. Because unschoolers don't rely on institutions, they must organize their own lives. Networks online and in the neighborhood serve this purpose.

For many young Americans growing up in this era, interpersonal relationships are hybrid. Face-to-face relationships go through periods of being augmented online or supported through other media such as the phone, or voice over IP such as Skype, instant messaging. Because it's harder to connect to like-minded kids when you don't have the pool of peers from school, unschoolers may be better served when relationships move through multiple modes. Kathryn, Joyce's fourteen-year-old daughter, described her involvement in an online role-playing website, Subeta.org:

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<sup>26</sup> "Taste Commentary: What They're Reading at the Kitchen Table" by Mark Oppenheimer for the *Wall Street Journal*, September 2, 2005 (<http://www.opinionjournal.com/taste/?id=110007199>).

<sup>27</sup> Such instantiations of unschooling clusters bear a similarity to Howard Rheingold's idea of smart mobs, which “consist of people who are able to work in concert together even if they don't know each other.” In this way, unschoolers get together as a subculture to forge an alternative, revolutionary type of education. However, Howard Rheingold's continues, the “people who make up smart mobs cooperate in ways never before possible because they carry devices that possess both communication and computing abilities.” As my readers have probably noticed, a major theme in this thesis is the unschoolers' ambivalence towards new technology for grassroots organization. (p.xii, Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*).

*“Mainly I started going on subeta because my friend Jake got me into it. We could chat every day on it (especially good since he lives in NY and it was so much easier to talk to him that way) and soon he got me into Role Playing. I created a bunch of characters and gave them personalities and quirks and now I'm RPin on the message boards and talking to people I met on the site. I have a friend in England and a friend in Poland that I talk to about every day as well as Jake. I also know someone from France and a girl who's second language is English, but she creates the most wonderful Role Plays and characters. She's 13 and seems to have a better grasp of the language than many people older than her...Being on subeta has certainly helped my writing and character creating abilities. I've also met tons of really nice people on there, and have been able to keep in touch with my friend Jake. ^^ ”<sup>28</sup>*



*Kathryn named this character Mi.  
(courtesy Kathryn Fetteroll)*

Joyce, Kathryn’s mother, sums up simply an important affordance of such online

networks: “Being able to meet people who share the same interests but don't happen to share the same city! Proximity doesn't need to be a basis for friendship.”<sup>29</sup> In fact, Kathryn highlights the pleasures of global cultural exchange.

These relationships, then, should not be considered just virtual or just real life. The unit of analysis should extend to encompass the way the individual incorporates the communication into her everyday life and real life communities. An eighteen-year-old homeschooler named Vlad moved from his interest in playing video games to programming and building computers. Through the Internet, he said, he was able to take part in a virtual community in which open-sourcers debate the ethical, as well as build the technical, aspects of computers and software. After being immersed in this world for a

<sup>28</sup> From an email from Kathryn, March 28, 2006. Kathryn lays out the varying denominations of her fantasy-play activities: “I did Neopets and other virtual pet things, but they never seemed real. I love creating characters on subeta, and creating their personalities so they seem almost real. But this is the first time I've ever been able to do that, because you couldn't really do that on Neopets as easy as subeta. And they're never really like ‘pets’ to me, that's just what they're called. So before that, I've only had imaginary friends and my real pets.” <http://subeta.org/>.

<sup>29</sup> Joyce’s email March 28, 2006.

while, Vlad came to have a “love-hate relationship” with computers, and felt he was spending too much time “sitting in front of a box,” even though much of his time was spent being social in IRCs chatting with open-source programmers.<sup>30</sup> Vlad wanted to share his knowledge and excitement with his real life community of homeschoolers at North Star, and now that he works at University of Massachusetts Amherst, he’s encouraging his building to switch to Linux and open-source software.<sup>31</sup> When I visited North Star a year or so after the workshop, younger kids there were still talking about Vlad’s open-source class. To take it a step further, I posit that Vlad’s unschooling moves through networks—the online community of open-source programmers and the real life community at North Star and the hybrid space of the UMass lab—in ways that call to mind Illich’s original vision. In 1971, Illich called for “learning webs”—ways of using technology to connect people to share skills and resources.<sup>32</sup>

Illich advocated for the use of technology towards social ends. Writing before the invention of the Internet, Illich provides a prescient suggestion for how people could better use technology:

*“Modern electronics, photo-offset, and computer technologies in principle have provided the hardware that can provide this freedom with a range of undreamt of in the century of the enlightenment. Unfortunately, the scientific know-how has been used mainly to increase the power and decrease the number of funnels through which the bureaucrats of education, politics, and information channel their quick frozen TV dinners. But the same technology could be used to make peer-matching, meeting, and printing as available as the private conversation over the telephone is now.”—Ivan Illich<sup>33</sup>*

Illich’s ideas still influence programmers interested in developing new media for social change. In the Wikipedia entry for Illich, for example, the editors make a self-referential

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<sup>30</sup> May 10, 2006 phone interview with Vlad.

<sup>31</sup> Vlad taught a class about the philosophy and mechanics of open-source at North Star: Self-Directed Learning for Teens: “Learning is Natural. School is Optional” (<http://www.northstarteens.org/>).

<sup>32</sup> Illich, *Deschooling Society*.

<sup>33</sup> p.27 Ivan Illich, in *After Deschooling, What?*, eds. Alan Gartner, Colin Greer, Frank Riessman.

note: “Of particular relevance here is [Illich’s] call (from a 1971 perspective) for the use of advanced technology to support ‘learning webs’. Many characteristics of these as described relate strongly to the nature and use of the WWW in general, and strongly to the workings and ideals of Wikipedia.”<sup>34</sup> But the philosophical message behind Illich’s theories holds true for technology-mediated and face-to-face contexts. The most straightforward example of learning webs doesn’t even necessitate technological assistance. For instance, unschoolers will find mentors in their neighborhoods or local communities, sometimes through word of mouth. Eli’s unschooling coop found Todd, their claymation workshop leader, through friends of colleagues. Mentoring becomes particularly important for high school-aged kids who may grow beyond their parents’ level. Unschoolers may approach a friendly high school teacher for tutoring or take a class at a local community college. And yet, a global public space simultaneously opens up. In Pierre Levy’s *Collective Intelligence*, he describes a utopian vision for a new era of shared knowledge: “Regardless of my temporary social position, regardless of the judgment of an educational institution about my abilities, I can also become an opportunity for learning to someone else. Through my experience of life, my professional career, my social and cultural habits, I can—since knowledge is coextensive with life—provide knowledge resources to the community.”<sup>35</sup> The production of knowledge is situated, and managed through systems of reputation and speed. Networks come down to human interactions, whether computer-mediated or not.

Unschooling kids learn how to navigate through these networks. Carsie’s invitation for me to come to Quo Vadis acknowledges the unschoolers’ sense that social

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<sup>34</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan\\_Illich](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan_Illich)

<sup>35</sup> p.12-3, Pierre Levy, *Collective Intelligence: Man’s Emerging World in Cyberspace*.

networking is a legitimate, participatory practice. “One thing that my mom has always been really good at and she passed on to me is that doing research by contacting whoever it is who’s an expert on the subject. It seems that’s a way to get away from mass media and get back to personal interactions... When I was into marine biology, I did this project on studying sea grass and so we went to the Baltimore aquarium and talked to the person who knew the most about sea grass...I do see more of that in the unschooling community...There’s no reason why you wouldn’t write your favorite author a letter and ask them a question about their book.”<sup>36</sup> Vlad seeks out networks of open-sourcers. Carsie taps people with expertise and common interests. Roberto finds me doing research through our commonly tagged del.icio.us links. Not unlike the unschooling conception of space and accessing of resources in Case Study #1, unschoolers’ conception of networking with people hinges on a fair amount of happenstance. While Peter and Mary flung open the doors of their home to objects in their communities, many unschoolers consider the Internet a way to extend that same mechanism further a-field. So too do unschoolers seek “kindred spirits” as Sandra put it, even though they may live in far-flung places.

This practice of networking is of course inflected with that ever-present unschooling element: freedom. The kids have the freedom to contact people. They aren’t kept within the institutionalized framework of pre-determined ways and means of networking. Therefore, they largely have to build these networks themselves. Most unschoolers don’t have that internalized fear or doubt about contacting authors or experts or other people. Inherent to the unschooling practice of networking is the unschoolers’ reconceptualization of the media itself: dismantled barriers between the author and

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<sup>36</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.

consumer, user-generated media, grassroots distribution, open access to media, audiences of producers, and in general, an empowered—yet oppositional—subcultural attitude in the face of mass society.

## Technocratic Critique of Networks

Unschoolers debate whether technology for networking and community is



beneficial or detrimental. These issues are particularly relevant for unschoolers. For instance, artist and unschooling mom, Heather explains that her kids play in the studio with her: "I would use large canvases up on the wall and paint with expressive movements and a lot of action.

The kids would feel that energy and fall into the rhythm of playing as well. I found it very difficult to figure out how to make sitting in front of the computer seem like productive work to the kids. It's very hard to find a balance."<sup>37</sup> For this unschooling mom, technology presents real life conflicts. Heather goes on to detail the tension between real life place and virtual space: "As a stay-at-home mom you're kind of isolated and the Internet becomes an important way to get your ideas out. I had read the book *Minutes of the Lead Pencil Society* and I was really against the idea of sitting in front of a computer, but then when I started putting up my comics on the Internet, I started reaching a lot of women. Now about 2000 people get a cartoon email from me. A lot of them are

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<sup>37</sup> December 6, 2005 phone interview with Heather.

from all over the world.”<sup>38</sup> Heather expresses the very personal level on which the technocratic critique manifests.

Carsie and I spoke about the technology debate within unschooling. “That’s a theme I’ve been interested in,” she told me. Unschoolers come from the cultural history of a radical questioning of modern society. And yet, technology and media infuse unschoolers’ lives, like most Americans’, more and more. “The more recent generation of unschoolers have all been very plugged in as far as the Internet goes.”<sup>39</sup> But still, some young unschoolers swim against the present day tide. I asked Carsie why and how there could be such varying sentiments in the unschooling subculture. “It’s hard to say...I’m definitely in both camps. I’ve seen both types in the unschooling community. It seems like there may be two camps about it. I know kids who are programmers and they’re pretty plugged-in in that way. And then I know several kids who work on farms and it’s an important part of their lives to be close to the ground.”<sup>40</sup> Even among the new generation of unschoolers, hackers vs. back-to-the-landers practice their similarly humanistic, anti-authoritarian lifestyles, and yet, the tools they choose to use are very different. They construct networks in different ways, in different contexts.<sup>41</sup>

Sandra, the subject of the Case Study #4, has met a lot of unschoolers face-to-face whom she first knew through the Internet. “I felt like we were kindred spirits in that we were able to volunteer time to help other people [through online discussion groups]...But

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<sup>38</sup> December 6, 2005 phone interview with Heather.

<sup>39</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.

<sup>40</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.

<sup>41</sup> “Before the word ‘hacker’ was misappropriated to describe people who break into computer systems, the term was coined (in the early 1960s) to describe people who create computer systems. The first people to call themselves hackers were loyal to an informal social contract called ‘the hacker ethic.’ As Steven Levy described it, this ethic included these principles: Access to computers should be unlimited and total. Always yield to the Hands-On Imperative. All information should be free. Mistrust authority—promote decentralization”(p.47, Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, quotes Levy’s 1984 book *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*).

we're not a community that's going to walk your dog when you twist your ankle."<sup>42</sup> The latter part of this quote reveals a tension in how unschoolers define community and *what networks are good for*. The critique anti-technology unschoolers put forth claims that such networks undermine real community place, in favor of sham, virtual community space. When I first met Matt, the subject of Case Study #5, at the *Learning in Our Own Way* conference, he argued that my use of the term *virtual community* was oxymoronic. When I visited him in Vancouver, we debated this topic again. He feels such online activity is *networking*, sure, but Matt defines *community* as a geographical place. He feels the "Internet [is] inherently degrading of local community and the possibility of real democracy emerging...that rampant virtuality, based on the eradication of time and space as functional communicative restraints, acts to separate individuals from their face-to-face relationships and localities."<sup>43</sup> For Matt, a social-anarchist, new media undercuts the issue of responsibility to a place. The social ramifications of this so-called virtual community disturb unschoolers like Matt. Randy and Beatrice, an unschooling couple, have a similar point of view:

*Beatrice. "I prefer real life community and that is something that we have to continuously evolve, work on and protect. It has to be maintained. As to virtual community, I sometimes read the EdgyCatin' Mama site and the zines- they provide a support and understanding, an 'Ah ha!' of people in a similar situation, that is sometimes lacking in the real community."*

*Randy "Virtual community is largely false, functioning more as a utilitarian 'network' which has some advantages for 'organizing' - Real life community is, for me, less about association based on common convictions and beliefs ( i.e. lefty, vegan, non-violent), and more about ...expecting people to hold repugnant views, and having at some level to 'get-along.' That's not to say there aren't going to be occasions where you will need to confront views you disagree with, but that it is easier sometimes when there is mutual respect and the awareness that there's*

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<sup>42</sup> Phone interview with Sandra, December 14, 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Matt Hern and Stu Chaulk's article "Roadgrading Community Culture: Why the Internet is so Dangerous to Real Democracy" ([http://www.democracynature.org/dn/vol6/hern\\_chaulk\\_internet.htm](http://www.democracynature.org/dn/vol6/hern_chaulk_internet.htm)).

*a strong likelihood that you will have to face each-other on a fairly regular basis.*”<sup>44</sup>

Many of us want community so badly that we believe technology can deliver it to us.

Steven Jones has written about the false promise of “any technologies, not just the Internet, which promise to reduce that complex to a singularity, or at least a unity, [which] will only deepen our sense of loss and estrangement from life and from others.”<sup>45</sup>

“Restoration is what...we really seek from technologies of communication” and some point out the futility of such restoration through technology.<sup>46</sup> They do so through an articulation of the difference between place and space, community and network. Some critics like Jones, fear this leads to a more disrupted sense of time and place. New media and such networks as have been described in this case study do afford unschoolers to experience connections with others of like-mind. “This is the battle in the new virtual communities. Armed with the tools of communication one can construct a wide network of connected voices, differing in timbre and substance, yet sharing a love of communication, forging primary bonds with strangers that seem otherwise impossible in mass society. Or, if one chooses, it is possible to never meet, never speak, and never understand those whom you don’t want to, spending your days living in a virtual ghetto.”<sup>47</sup> In America today, a general anxiety exists about the political repercussions of people only communicating with other likeminded folks through CMC, as in the main critique of the blogosphere being an *echo chamber*. While research from the *Pew Internet and American Life Project* reports that most people don’t stay within their own

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<sup>44</sup> Email interview with Beatrice and Randy March 20, 2006.

<sup>45</sup> p.33, Steven Jones, *Virtual Culture: Identity & Communication in Cybersociety*.

<sup>46</sup> p.32, Steven Jones, *Virtual Culture: Identity & Communication in Cybersociety*.

<sup>47</sup> p.72, Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*.

political spheres online,<sup>48</sup> the anxieties about emergent technology in society remain—what Huhtamo calls “topoi” or common reactions at the birth of new media forms.<sup>49</sup> These topoi reveal an American concern about a more polarized public, ignorant and uncaring about consensus.

While I admit that unschoolers stick by their belief that *school is bad*, they must constantly defend their beliefs and talk newcomers through the paradigm-shift. They are not ignorant of other points of view, lost in their own world. Rather their ideology is one constantly being constructed, defended, and challenged. The technology debate within the unschooling subculture interests me precisely because this point of tension shows the dynamic way in which the subculture continues to redefine itself. Further, it’s not so much two camps, as it’s more often two camps within one person.

But what is it about new media networks that gives rise to such suspicions among anti-tech unschoolers? Steven Colbert has said it's not the truth that the public wants from news want but “truthiness.”<sup>50</sup> Is the unschooling virtual community really just communityishness? Or is it authentic? The technocratic critique argues that online networks further aggravate the alienating social predicament in which we find ourselves. In the void of any semblance of community in the past (how many years? Since the

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<sup>48</sup> “[P]rominent commentators have expressed concern that growing use of the internet would be harmful to democratic deliberation. They worried that citizens would use the internet to seek information that reinforces their political preferences and avoid material that challenges their views. That would hurt citizens’ chances of contributing to informed debates. The new survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project in collaboration with the University of Michigan School of Information survey belies those worries. It shows that internet users have greater overall exposure political arguments, including those that challenge their candidate preferences and their positions on some key issues” ([http://www.pewInternet.org/PPF/r/93/press\\_release.asp](http://www.pewInternet.org/PPF/r/93/press_release.asp)).

<sup>49</sup> *From Kaleidoscopic to Cybernerd: Notes Towards an Archaeology of Media*.

<sup>50</sup> I'm totally stealing this reference from Cory Doctorow, in reference to writing science fiction (from a ProjectNML interview 2006). And it's really interesting to see how the Pew research flattens the distinction between virtual and real life community, between networking and community, communityishness and community. A Pew study from Jan 2006 says: “Barry Wellman (1999, 2001) has shown how this shift from solitary communities to social networks began before the Internet. Yet the Internet surely has accelerated the change. It has made it easy for people to connect without living nearby and without knowing each other well. It has probably increased the variety of the kinds of people who are network members. Where once communication was confined to neighbors (usually similar in ethnicity and social status), it is now more diversified, bridging multiple social worlds” (Jeffrey Boase et al., *Pew Internet & American Life Project: Strength of Internet Ties*, [http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Internet\\_ties.pdf](http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Internet_ties.pdf)).

Industrial Revolution? Since post-WWII?), perhaps this “connectivity” feels “communityish.” Unschooling anti-tech folks would say this feeling of “communityishness” is a delusion—a networked hallucination, MacLuhan might have said. In a sort of Marxist critique, one could see how *buying into* this online world entails jumping through a portal to a debased, commercialized pop culture. Anti-tech unschoolers equate buying into new media with tacitly supporting just another instantiation of the technocratic, commercial society. This is not unlike the criticism of fan culture, which doubts that fan participation can be ultimately empowering. Duncombe writes that *Star Trek* fans, for instance, “are continually betrayed in their quest to make the culture theirs, and the process of connection must be continually reinvented, ad infinitum.”<sup>51</sup> Along this train of thought, those who use the technocratic critique believe that new media, by removing people from their real environments, only serves to widen the gap between have and have-nots on a fundamental level.<sup>52</sup> Because the notion of authentic community is so crucial to unschooling, opting out of the place of community in favor of the space of virtual community becomes genuinely problematic for many unschoolers.

Those unschoolers who fully embrace high tech media and technology often come from the computer geek tradition of subversion. Hackers’ and open-sourcers’

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<sup>51</sup>p.113, Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*.

<sup>52</sup> Rob Reich, in his *Civic Perils of Homeschooling*, turns this line of argument against homeschooling in general: “Let me put the matter quite simply. Customizing a child's education through homeschooling represents the victory of a consumer mentality within education, suggesting that the only purpose that education should serve is to please and satisfy the preferences of the consumer.” This criticism is quite ironic given that most unschoolers are ideologically opposed to mass consumerism. It reflects the double bind of a Marxist philosophy: how do you ever escape the Capitalist system? If you choose not to take part, you do so by boycotting, which in this case can be construed as cherry picking. Additionally, I feel the technocratic critique has entrenched anti-tech unschoolers into a “transmission model” of communication, at least when it comes to CMC (p.72-3, James Wertsch, *Voices of the Mind: Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action*). I discussed in Case Study #1, the practice of listening is participatory in the Bakhtinian sense. But anti-tech unschoolers conceptualize reading or listening with computers or playing videogames in a more black and white way—simply as *consuming*—that is “signal received.” Many anti-tech unschoolers make a distinction between reading a book and reading online. It comes down to what I see as a not very nuanced theory of the consumption of media according to Marxist readings.

practices—while high tech—are DIY as well, often with an emphasis on social change. But too often there's not enough outreach and communications with populations in need; this is one aspect of the Digital Divide. Open-source projects end up being a sort of cultural capital, like a code that speaks about radical social change but that only other programmers can read. "To get such capital, people must act as individual Internet entrepreneurs."<sup>53</sup> The pro-tech unschoolers would definitely see the benefits of this. As independent thinkers, they choose to come together to do activities with other unschoolers or other Americans who have similar belief systems and common interests. People see this as the Libertarian streak in unschooling and in new media frontierism. The unschooling subculture has such a strong belief in keeping these networks nonhierarchical and ad hoc in order to never impose on another's freedom. On the other hand, it's hard to get organized, get anything done, or reach out to those who you wouldn't be hanging out with anyway.<sup>54</sup> Unschoolers' subculture is so anti-commercialization, it's really hard to make any money off of unschoolers.<sup>55</sup> You go to a conference and there's not much to buy because there's a core resistance to pre-packaged curricula. This isn't a necessarily bad thing at all. Networks stay uncluttered by carpetbaggers, but on the other hand, the movement finds itself in the ghetto of American capitalism. These organizational, cultural, and economic factors reinforce unschooling's

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<sup>53</sup> p.42, Jeffrey Boase et al., *Pew Internet and American Life Project: Strength of Internet Ties* ([http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Internet\\_ties.pdf](http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Internet_ties.pdf)).

<sup>54</sup> According to Stephen Duncombe, "This model is the very essence of a libertarian community: individuals free to be who they want and to cultivate their own interests, while simultaneously sharing in each other's differences. It allows people the intimacy and primary connections they don't find in mass society, but with none of the stifling of difference that usually comes with tight-knit communities. This type of association has long been the dream of anarchism, parallels the hopes of multiculturalism, resonates with the virtual community of the Internet, and describes the ideal of the place that is bohemia" (p.52, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*). Mitchell Stevens writes about the difference in organizational structures between unschoolers and Christian Fundamental homeschoolers in his book *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*. The religious homeschoolers have become a political lobbying force to be reckoned with, while the unschoolers remain off the mainstream radar, for the most part.

<sup>55</sup> I also discuss this consciously economically unviable model in the fifth case study.

status as a small, underground, and not all that influential network—its true meaningfulness unbeknownst to all except those who drop out and tune in.

While media objects and authors (especially Holt and the *Teenage Liberation Handbook*) do hold special places in the network, unschoolers hold up the ideal of unschooling as the authority.

## **Conclusion**

Unschooling, as viewed through the unit of analysis of networks, appears to be a subculture in the dynamic process of defining itself. Innovation and conflict are necessarily part of this process. The unschoolers practice their conception of de-hierarchical, grassroots networks; this practice simultaneously polices the boundaries of the subculture. The informally canonized unschooling texts can be held up because of those authors' ability to speak to the underlying essence of unschooling—that love of learning philosophy. Simultaneously, they allow unschoolers enough space to invent their own mix-n-match participatory practices. Thus, no outright methodology gets reproduced through unschooling networks. Unschoolers reproduce these subcultural structures through initiation into the practices and constant, conscious discussion of how to practice non-hierarchical networks.

Geographically dispersed unschoolers come to practice networking as an integral part of their unschooling. Such activities as writing to authors, hosting other unschoolers, finding mentors in your community, reaching out to newcomers online, as well as other instantiations, make up the unschooling practice of networking. Much of this happens face-to-face through social connections and conferences, but social networking software

such as MySpace, flickr, del.icio.us, and Friendster, as well as other Web 2.0 technology such as podcasts and blogs, allow the techno-enthusiastic unschoolers to read-write their networks through user-generated content and archives. Networking is not just a skill, then, but part of the unschooling way of life.

As my unit of analysis encompasses the networks of geographically dispersed population of unschoolers, tensions between virtual space and real life place arise as a matter of course. In the 60s and 70s, the urban-rural dichotomy was an axis along which unschooling identity stretched and affected the sense of community in everyday practice. The global space of the Internet and the local place of unschooling communities intersect and reinforce each other, in the case of Vlad's open-source activities, Carsie's networking, and Kathryn's creative role-playing. Hybrids of the real and the virtual coexist, and more and more inform each other. Still, debates about the authenticity of space vs. place continue to spark conversation among unschoolers.

The role technology should play in networking is a source of tension within the subculture and within the psyche of individual unschoolers. A critical consciousness tradition keeps unschoolers as a community of practice engaged in negotiating its identity and its practices. Unschoolers, because of their critical consciousness about social, cultural, economic, and political factors, call virtual community into question. Many harbor ambivalence, if not outright rejection for the notion, casting doubt upon the political viability of such networks and seeing them contributing to the alienation and fragmentation of contemporary life. As Carsie boils it down, "there are two camps...

There's political activism that wants to change and then there's the back-to-the-land that wants to just scrap the whole thing and grow some food.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.

