"HEY, GUYS? THERE'S BEEN A CHANGE IN THE RAID:" INFORMATION USE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

by

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A THESIS

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This study examines public sources of information, their usage and how these factors effect social change in virtual communities, specifically in the MMORPG World of Warcraft. Using the concepts of the “public” and the “public sphere” as developed by Jürgen Habermas, Robert Park, and John Dewey and the weak-tie theory by Granovetter, this study used a loose ethnography coupled with forum monitoring and in-depth interviews to determine public sources of information and information usage by players in in-game decision making. Also, the study seeks to clarify how players use information, and how this information sparks social change both at micro, meso and macro levels within the game and meta-game.

This study found that players use internet forums and in-game social tools as their sources of public information to engage in free discussion about issues in the game, their lives and their community. This study also found that social change is influenced by information players retrieve from the forums and that weak ties are often generated in the forums. Guilds that frequently engage in the forums are in the public eye and subject to instability from external pressure. Guilds that do not interact regularly in the forums are less subject to external pressures, but subject to stagnation. These results support that WoW does have a function public sphere, public information sources and weak ties within the game often transmit more information, and with this information a chance for innovation and social change.
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Introduction

This study explores public information sources in the virtual, online community of World of Warcraft (WoW) and how these sources, in concordance with social ties, affect social change. In the information business, news organizations are struggling to come to terms with the sudden changes in technology and communication, namely, how to integrate new societal and technological factors such as virtual worlds and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) into their news process. By examining how information and social change work in a virtual world, this study seeks to illuminate how players in these new, Internet-based communities, use information on a day-to-day basis to make decisions.

Similar to real-life organizations, guilds – or groups of players cooperating to advance their standing in WoW – act as social building blocks for the virtual world of Azeroth, in which gameplay takes place. The game consists of players teaming up in order to achieve team-based goals that require up to 40 people playing avatars (virtual representations of themselves) to complete. The goal of WoW and guilds is to progress through ever-increasingly difficult tasks which, through teamwork and time, provide rewards to individual players’ avatars and their guilds alike.

In recent years, online space has been getting more attention as a tool for social interaction and community-building. As computer and technology have grown more advanced, online landscapes have grown immensely. One such online landscape is World of Warcraft (WoW). WoW is considered a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, or an MMORPG (often pronounced as “More-pig”). As of October 2007, there were approximately 10
million players (Gibson, 2008). In November 2008, WoW released new content to its online world, known as an expansion, in which a record-breaking 2.8 million units sold world-wide in 24 hours, adding over 1 million new accounts to total 11 million players (Thorsen, 2008). Because of its sheer size, WoW has begun to attract researchers from fields as diverse as sociology to epidemiology because it provides a virtual space in which human behavior can be studied both anonymously and on a grand scale (Vastag, 2007).

The primary feature of WoW is not the virtual world, but the communities that form within this virtual world. As an online community, WoW players are a distinct group of people with shared interests, backgrounds, geographical area or culture, interacting through the use of computer mediated communication, or CMC. In this case, the geography would be the game itself, and the culture and shared interests are inherently linked to the playing of the game (Pirius, 2007). Specifically, within WoW, players unite to form guilds, or groups of like-minded players who use teamwork to advance through tougher areas of the world (Gibson, 2008). Technically, guilds are real people working through avatars, or digital representations of self, to accomplish goals and form relationships within the boundaries of WoW’s virtual landscape. Recent research into guild play suggests players do form, and feel, a unique sense of community when playing online. Perhaps one of the reasons WoW is so popular is that it forces its players to be social. Guilds are absolutely necessary for progression in the game, and being a member of an elite guild can command respect on the server that the user plays on (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell & More, 2007a).

Yet little research has been conducted on how information affects a tightly knit online virtual community such as a WoW guild. In real-world studies, research into community journalism has found that information infrastructure within communities affects civic
engagement, with members of communities actively seeking out sources of communication and information to build community identity (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). Other sociological studies have looked at how strong ties on the micro level and weak ties on the macro level affect social change and information flow (Granovetter, 1973). Still other studies have looked at the different roles news and information play when society or community is conceptualized as an active, autonomous “public” that shares public information and public space, as opposed to a “mass” of individuals who have and need little shared public space and information. Jürgen Habermas (1989) points out that there is a "collective self" or "autonomous public" inherent in communities that relies on norms and a common understanding of these norms. Norms are shaped and reinforced by communication, which includes mass sources of information such as modern media. Critically analyzing these sources of information, which help sustain Habermas’ public sphere (or communicative space where norms are negotiated) is important, since institutions that create and distribute information are essential in creating a "public dialogue" of sorts which works to maintain norms or promote change depending on the situation. However, little research has been done to understand how these systems work in the emerging phenomena of virtual worlds, a point which this study seeks to remedy.

Review of the Literature

The study of modern communication and the roles it plays in communities has roots in the pragmatist movement in philosophy, as well as in sociology (Friedland & Shah, 2005). A key concept of interest is integration, the why and how of social structures and how groups within these structures cohere and function within it. Ferdinand Tonnies, a 19th century social
philosopher, made the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, which refers roughly to community and society, respectively. In *Gemeinschaft*, people remain together as a community in spite of differentiating factors, while *Gesellschaft* covers a macro perspective, in which people remain apart regardless of potential uniting factors. *Gesellschaft* is commonly represented as "modern" society, which is complex and fragmented, whereas *Gemeinschaft* represents a more rustic sense of community.

Social philosopher John Dewey, a pragmatist, focused especially on the relationship between communication and community, and how these two processes support and influence each other (1927). Dewey speculated that communications helped integrate community, and in turn, community and communications served as an integrator for society (Friedland & Shah, 2005). Other theorists, most notably Park and the Chicago School, held to a functionalist theory of urban ecology. The Chicago School focused on structural concerns of community, specifically the patterns of socialization and communication among dislocated immigrants in a large urban center (Park, 1972). Park also extended the definition of communication to newspapers and by extension, mass communication when looking at communication and social structure (1967). Park held that foreign-language newspapers aided immigrants in assimilating into American life and culture, by preserving the varied ethnic cultures while acclimating immigrants to the differences of life in the United States (Park, 1922). Therefore, Park believed community was possible in large cities, something not traditionally accepted in academic circles at the time. While new communities may take time to grow and develop through the hardship of adaptation, exchange of ideas and experiences among groups found in a large urban center, facilitated by newspapers, could help stabilize the development of community (Park, 1922). These groups would then constitute a rational information exchanging “public,” as opposed to a “crowd.”
Other theorists looked at community with a special emphasis on the locations of people and their activities. However, all of the early theoretical approaches discussed here are concerned with macrostructure of community, and how community works as an integrated system (Friedland & Shah, 2005). Researchers such as Robert and Helen Lynd explored the concept of macrostructures and change in their two studies of Muncie, Indiana. In their "Middletown Studies," they found that from 1929 to 1935, relatively little changed the social hierarchies and social attitudes of those in Muncie, despite the cataclysm of the Great Depression. Their methodology centered around six "main-trunk" activities of community: Making a living, making a home, training the young, using leisure in various forms, engaging in religious practices and engaging in community activities (Lynd, 1929).

In recent years, the emphasis of community studies has been redirected to social networks. Fischer (1977) and others argued that interpersonal networks, which are microstructures, form personal communities in which ties to others (friends, family and neighbors) take on associative qualities. Furthering this idea, cities began to be thought of as “networks of networks” (Craven and Wellman, 1973).

Only recently has the interplay between mass communication and community studies begun to emerge. Lazarfeld and Janowitz, whose studies in interpersonal influence and the community media mark them as early pioneers in this area (and other areas), are applicable today. Lazarsfeld and colleagues determined that interpersonal discussion of facts gleaned from mass communication sources acts as a mediator for mass communication (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944/1968; Friedland & Shah, 2005). Janowitz developed the concept of limited liability in communities, acknowledging “the continuing of attachments of urban residents to families, kin, and primary networks” but also realizing the relative ease with which people could
withdraw from social networks (Friedland & Shah, 2005; Janowitz 1952/1967). He realized that
a large metropolitan daily could not accurately integrate the diverse interests of the smaller
networks that made up the large network of the city it served. Instead, he found it was the local
weeklies covering specific areas and groups that performed the function of community
integration, serving as public information sources directly related to the community's interests.
Others also acknowledged several ways in which community media served an integrative
function: building and maintaining local consensus, building traditions, and facilitating the
establishment of personal and social contracts (Lowrey, Brozana & Mackay, 2008).

**Community and public**

Habermas’ (1989) "collective self" or "autonomous public" inherent in communities
resides on norms and a common understanding of said norms. This public (or multiple publics)
resides in a public sphere, or the boundaries and borders within which communication occurs.
Friedland (2001) states that the public sphere is a concept that helps measure the gap between
facts and norms in political life, the degree to which we act according to either the reasonable
“dictates of power and strategy” or “a normative orientation toward the public good.” The public
sphere depends on a civil society, a lifeworld, and a private sphere to generate information. In
other words, the autonomous public, composed of private spheres (or microstructures),
negotiates a shared intersubjective, relational space with others, this communicative action
makes up the public sphere. The boundaries of this space are shared norms, or intersubjective
meanings and they are always in flux, being negotiated. Friedland also states that the larger
boundaries of “increased fragmentation” directly shapes the public sphere (2001).
However, one cannot imagine a public sphere without a notion of "the public" who inhabit it. The existence of "the public," or more specifically, a community of individuals who have autonomy necessary to shape and make decisions within a democratic society, has been a question in the past. Walter Lippmann, who believed democratic ideals had deteriorated early in the early 20th Century, held that no community or public capable of making decisions within a democratic society existed. Lippmann (1922) supported a top-down approach to information, wherein learned men, or elites, would filter down what information they thought the masses could handle while keeping the decision-making process to themselves. In contrast, Dewey, in *The Public and Its Problems*, points out that democracy can work, from the bottom up, as long as communication works (1927). To him, a public is any group of citizens whose shared interests and common goals spur them into united action; furthermore, any groups affected by actions, and ignited by some another public, may form their own (1927). According to Dewey, publics are continually forming, overlapping and dissipating and their inception and dissolution are largely based on communication. Later, Park used a similar approach to explain community structures in which people join in collective action to "recreate the world" to better suit them (Park, 1922; 1923). To Park and Dewey, the media served as major agents of the information which could create, change, and perhaps dissolve publics.

Friedland & Shah (2005), says of the public sphere and the media:

The political system relies on the media system not only to supply but also to filter considered public opinion inward to its own decision-making processes and outward to the audiences who hold communicative power
and who therefore determine legitimacy. While the public sphere supplies communicative power, the media system supplies “media power” (251).

In other words, the media are the mouthpieces for the political forces within the community, but they are also a voice for the community itself to those political forces. Their primary function is to aid the negotiation of meaning within the public sphere and on its figurative boundaries.

News media that serve community serve power holders in a community as well. Research by Tichenor, Olien, and Donohue (1980) demonstrates that news media reflect the degree to which power is concentrated in communities. Others used the framework to show that social power structures constrain the media’s ability to help bring about social change (Demers and Viswanath, 1999). And others suggest media also help satisfy the need to reduce distance, the need to participate in political decisions, the need to reduce social “gapping”, and the need to gain access with an information source (Stamm & Weis, 1982a, 1982b).

Community and Media

What constitutes community media? If large media sources (such as nationally broadcast cable television shows) do not serve the needs of smaller communities, then community media are by default targeted toward the smaller publics that reside within the large one. Some researchers say community media's motivations must lie with providing news to the community, engaging the community, and empowering the politically disenfranchised (Friedland & Shah, 2005). To be classified as community media, the media must serve the community they represent. However, with the advent of the information age and the rise of “communities of
interest” not necessarily bound by geographical locations, it has become clear that community is an evolving concept.

Lowrey, Brozana and Mackay (2008), through a qualitative and quantitative analysis of articles on community and news media, expand the breadth of the community construct, stating that “community is a process of negotiating shared symbolic meaning.” Defining community as a process frees us from the question of whether community must be geographical or not. Such a definition focuses more on the process of building norms among members of a community. Reviewing 108 scholarly articles published from 1995 to 2005, the researchers sought to map how community scholars in the field define community. Of the 65 studies which provided a conceptual definition of community, 30 articles were tied to geographical location (Lowrey, Brozana & Mackay, 2008). This geographic perspective holds that “territorially organized systems” constitute community (Taylor, Lee & Davie, 2000). Twenty-seven of the articles in the study refer to “imagined” communities, or those communities not defined by geographic borders (2008). Imagined communities could be an ethnic group (Gavrilos, 2002) or even a virtual community bound together by a shared experience, such as a game (Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Zhang, Yee & Nickell, 2006). Also included in 20 of the articles was the concept of interpretive communities. Interpretive communities are formed by people who share common goals or common interests (Kurpius, 2000; McLeod & McKenzie, 1998). Interpretive communities function as spaces for identity formation outside of or within “mainstream cultures” and can involve cultural forums such as mass media, especially when media reflect and promote the community through reinforcement of shared symbols and meanings (Sakamoto, 1999; Hamilton, 1998).
The expanding world has made necessary technology which closes the geographical gap, or rather, makes it relatively non-existent. In response, some theorists see symbolic interaction, or deriving shared norms (intersubjective meanings) through interpersonal meaning creation, as being important for maintaining communities (Blumer, 1969). However, while structure and location are not community in and of themselves, the degree to which they function as “facilitators” can play a part in how a community develops and what kind of community it is (e.g. a virtual community on the Internet has different structural components than a local bridge club or a small town). Lowrey, et al. (2008) suggest that not only is community a process of meaning creation, it also encompasses the “degree of structure—or the degree to which facilities, institutions, and spaces are structured for interaction.” Such interaction “facilitates the process of negotiation and sharing” about what a community means and represents to its members (275-294).

If the creation and negotiation of community are defined as processes, the roles of community journalism, community media and their production may be described as processes, as well. As the face of community changes, so does the size, medium, method and scope of the media that represent it. Also, as communities grow more diverse, the definition of community media must be expanded from merely providing news or protecting the political rights of small groups. While activism can be a part of community media, it is not necessarily its main function.

If community is the process of meaning-making facilitated by structure, then community media must help reveal the structures, ideas, institutions and resources that are shared by the community while simultaneously helping with the creation of intersubjective meaning within the community they serve. Two subconstructs Lowrey, et al. (2008) propose for measuring the degree to which community media aid meaning-making are “listening/pluralism”, or the degree
to which a media source seeks out and fosters diverse viewpoints, and “leading/cohesiveness”, or
the degree to which the media source attempts to combine these diverse viewpoints into an
intelligible representation of the community to its members (2008).

In this way, community media act as storytellers, gathering the various voices of the
community and including them in a “story” about that community. Matei, Ball-Rokeach, & Qiu
(2001) suggest that communities “need to tell stories about themselves if they are to emerge as
distinct social entities.” According to Kim and Ball-Rokeach, Habermas pointed out that civil
society and the communicative process are symbiotic (2006). Habermas (1989) differentiated
between the “lifeworld” and “system,” exclusive pieces of modern societies; he discussed an
area of the lifeworld where individuals come together to exchange information, both personal
and shared. Fisher (1989) suggested the idea that people are storytellers. Human communication
is functionally the process of telling stories, and special attention should be paid to the narrative
rationality of stories being told, since they often are told to facilitate meaning-making. This view
places the story as an essential meaning-maker, through which people express values and,
through this, produce commonality (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2001; Lowrey, et al. 2008). Kim and
Ball-Rokeach suggest the lifeworld is built and maintained on communicative actions or
storytelling directed towards the establishment of mutual understandings (2006). Community
story tellers can fulfill a variety of roles in three distinct divisions: macro-storytellers, meso-
storytellers and micro-storytellers (Friedland & Shah, 2005; Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Matei,
et al. 2001). Matei et al. (2001) explain:

Macrostorytelling agents such as mainstream media tell stories primarily
about the whole city, the nation, or even the world, where the imagined
audience is broadly conceived as the population of the city, county, or region. Mesoagents are more focused on particular sections of the city (e.g., Westside or South Central in Los Angeles) or specific communities. The residents in their family, friend, and neighbor networks are the microstorytelling agents. When residents talk about their community in neighborhood council meetings, at a neighborhood block party, at the dinner table, or over the fence with neighbors, they become local storytelling agents—participants in an active imagining of their community (176).

In an ideal community, meso- and micro-storytellers form a tight-knit and responsive bond which facilitates discussion about the local community. Matei, et al. (2001) suggest that in a community with an integrated storytelling network, “people are informed about what is happening in their local neighborhood and talk about neighborhood issues and events with their neighbors” in a way that creates a more engaged “public,” of the sort Dewey and Park imagined.

_Civic engagement and social capital_

Civic engagement, a concept with roots in Alexis de Toqueville’s _Democracy in America_, has been given new life in community studies thanks to many theorists, such as Jack McLeod and colleagues (see McLeod, Daily, Guo, Eveland, Bayer, Yang, et al. 1996; Friedland & Shah, 2005), Robert Putnam (see Putnam, 1996; 2000) and Ray Oldenburg (1999). Civic engagement, or the participation of the public within the civic sphere, includes active duty in voluntary organizations and political activities which afford opportunities for people to solidify or form new connections, create joint meanings through accomplishments, and collectively give voice to
Social networks and social change

Information passed through a community in the form of stories is generally thought to travel through a series of networks, and networks are important avenues for information, sharing, and social change (Friedkin, 1980; Granovetter, 1973; 1983; Quan-Haase, Wellman, Witt & Hampton, 2001). In his trilogy “The Network Society,” Manuel Castells offers an explanation for how information passed through networks can account for sometimes massive shifts in meanings (see Castells 1996; 1997; 1998). Castells (2000) maintains that media in the information age enhance and accelerate the production of knowledge and information that constitutes an
expanding “virtuous circle,” of contacts and friends without the boundaries of space. He also states that processing this information, a basic component of life, is at the heart of social networks and also social transformation (Castells, 2000).

Granovetter (1973) saw the examination of social networks as a tool for linking micro and macro levels of sociological theory. He conceptualized social “ties,” which are directly related to the diffusion of influence and information. He emphasizes “weak ties” in looking at interaction across groups (Granovetter 1973; 1983). The effectiveness of a tie is based on time, energy, emotional intensity, and the reciprocal services that characterize the tie. The stronger the dyadic tie (the tie between persons A and B) then the more people who exist within A and B’s social set will be tied together. For example, if A and B were a married couple with strong ties, then chances are A would know B’s friends well and visa-versa.

Arguably, however, the “weak ties” between groups are more important. Chances are that person A’s friend set would have at least some weak ties to person B’s friend set, thus creating two relatively large groups that interact. Granovetter (1983) states, “The weak tie between [a person] and his acquaintance, therefore, becomes not merely a trivial acquaintance tie but rather a crucial bridge between two densely knit clumps of close friends . . . these clumps would not, in fact, be connected to one another at all were it not for the existence of weak ties” (202 ).

This theory is supported by the fact that to have strong ties, people are often similar in certain ways. If A and B are similar, then those within their social sets may share similarities as well, thus enabling the formation of social ties. Weak ties serve as social bridges because they facilitate indirect connections among points in a social network. When passed through weak ties, information (or whatever is being passed along) will have a greater diffusion rate and greater impact potential. (Granovetter, 1973; 1983; Friedkin, 1980; Fine & Kleinman, 1979).
Importantly, weak ties facilitate social change more than strong ones: Those with strong ties are more likely to have the same ideas because they frequently interact with the same people, but weak ties are often not so rigid in their knowledge-base and often bring with them new information and a chance for innovation. In addition to their role as social integrators, effective/extended social networks also play a powerful role in shaping flows of public opinion and influence. For example, a town gossip may only have strong ties to four other people who may or may not know each other; therefore, the gossip has little power to spread information through strong ties. The gossip must rely on the weak ties connecting the entire town to begin a rumor; weak ties facilitate information exchange across varied and dissimilar social groups.

Marginal innovators within a social group are often rich in weak ties, while central innovators are often bogged down with strong ties; therefore, the greatest diffusion of information often occurs among marginal innovators (Granovetter, 1973). Central innovators often operate within an effective network, those that they know most well and interact with regularly. The remainder of contacts within the social set consists of extended networks (Granovetter, 1973). While the extended network may not be tied to the ego, or central innovator, they will be tied to people tied to him or her and tied to even more people not tied to him. These extended networks are important for information exchange with other networks not necessarily connected to that of the ego, because they facilitate information exchange on a two-way basis, information from the effective network flows outwards to other networks and groups while the effective network receives information from outside groups and networks (Granovetter, 1973; 1983).

Information or a message provided by the macro storyteller can induce social changes within a community or, conversely, help to maintain norms. The message, even if seen by only
one person, can reach a wide audience through weak ties. First the person will pass information along to his or her effective network, then, under some circumstances, through the extended network. If such information is passed through a community or communities many times over, it may become a norm. Community media producers catalog these norms in the form of narratives and stories, and then redistribute them through a medium, presenting a reflection, a social barometer of sorts, for the community to refer to. In this way it maintains commonality. However, if these stories, passed on through extended networks, begin to relate different stories, then the message of the community media outlet will change. For instance, if a once prosperous neighborhood went through economic hardship, then the community media outlet's messages would change, telling stories about failing businesses or higher crime rates. If these stories are repeated enough, the community's self-image may change, or the information may spark civic action on the part of the people. In this case, the community media outlet helped to induce change. This process is similar to the role of media and “storytelling” in the process of maintaining community, as discussed by Lowrey, et al. (2008) and Kim & Ball-Rokeach (2001).

Community on the Internet

In recent years, some researchers have begun studying how community functions through CMC, or computer-mediated communication. Some believe online communication provides opportunities for "horizontal communication arrangements" as opposed to top-down approaches (Malina & Jankowski, 2002). A popular refrain in this scholarship is that CMC can be used to increase civic engagement and participation in the democratic process; in many early studies governments approached the internet from the "top-down" method (Brants, 1996); however, recent studies show that "electronic networks are [....] in a prime position to mediate
communication" and "promote particular internal and external relations" (Malina & Jankowski, 2002). An analysis of community weblogs by Rutgliano (2005) suggests that "a mostly self-organized network of individuals can produce content that corresponds to the goals of the weblog’s central administrators - without direct guidance." In short, while research does not show a utopian system of communication, CMC, when organized correctly, can accomplish communication goals effectively. Virtual communities that allow fans of television programs to communicate have received considerable attention. Scholars (Andrejevic, 2008; Baym 1993, 1998, 2002; Turkle, 1995; Smith, 1999) have suggested that CMC, and by extension, online forums allow fans to relate to each other through discussions on the program content. Menon (2007), through an ethnographic and participant observation, analyzed discourse on the online bulletin boards dedicated to *Once and Again*, a now-defunct episodic evening drama. The study found that community and activism existed "as dimensions of the members’ electronically mediated social interactions" within the context of voice theory; findings from the study illustrated "a richness of human self-involvement with the program’s text and a dogged grassroots campaign to 'save' the show from cancellation," which included community-funded billboards over major highways (Menon, 2007). Thus, CMC may have the capacity to produce a international community that is both real and “virtual.”

Other studies have shown that online communities, despite being fragmented and often anonymous, do not necessarily suffer because of these "downsides," and are often successful in producing a certain amount of civic engagement among members of the online community and beyond. Wellman, Quaan-Haas, Witte, and Hampton (2002) found that often online social contact supplements the frequency of face-to-face and telephone contact, and online activity also supplements participation in voluntary organizations and politics. They also found that frequent
e-mail users have a greater sense of online community. Thus, as the Internet becomes increasingly integrated into everyday life, it may augment social capital, leading it to be more "geographically dispersed" (Wellman et al., 2002).

How the Internet affects social capital and civic engagement is a complex issue. Wellman et al.’s study, gleaned from the results of a large 1998 survey of the National Geographic website, makes an interesting point. On one hand, concerned parties, including scholars, have long worried that the so-called "Information Age" has led to the decline of community (Putnam, 1996, 2000; Wellman, 1999). Some issues which stand out are "the weakening of private community: social contact with kin, friends, workmates, and neighbors" and the decline and disengagement from public, face-face communities (Wellman et al., 2002).

The issue lies in the theoretical construct of social capital and civic engagement. But what if nay-sayers are only measuring old forms of community and participation, while new forms of communication and organization are forming "under the radar", connecting people (Wellman et al., 2002)? Evidence suggests that the observed decline has not led to social isolation, but to community becoming embedded in social networks rather than groups, and a movement of community relationships from easily observed public spaces to less-accessible private homes (Wuthnow, 1991; Guest & Wierzbicki, 1999; Wellman, 1999, 2001; Fischer, 2001; Lin, 2001). If people are at home instead of engaging in casual, public social life, then they may be going online to fulfill certain social needs (Smith, 1999; Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukopadhay, & Scherlis, 1998; Matei and Ball-Rokeach, 2001). This could be construed as evidence that online communities can build and maintain strong ties among individuals. Through research into “virtual” communities it has been suggested that most relationships formed online continue in physical space, leading to new forms of community
characterized by a mixture of online and offline interactions (e.g., Rheingold, 2000; Müller, 1999; Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2001). Online interactions fill communication gaps between face-to-face meetings and make nonlocal ties more viable. Wellman et al. (2002) state:

Our research shows no single Internet effect. At a time of spatially dispersed community, the Internet facilitates social contact that supplements face-to-face and telephone contact. At a time of declining civic engagement, the Internet provides tools for those already involved to increase their engagement. At a time of partial identity with multiple personal communities, the Internet provides another means for feeling connected with friends and kin. Rather than weakening other forms of community, those who are more active offline are more active online – and vice-versa. In this way, people are incorporating the Internet into their everyday lives even as the Internet is quietly fostering the changing composition of social capital [...] Frequent use of the Internet turns people on, not off. Involvement in the Internet is the best predictor towards having a positive attitude towards community online. The correlations between active community behavior and a sense of community are specific: Frequent online communicators with friends have a positive sense of online community, while frequent online communicators with kin have positive feelings towards the Internet as a facilitator of kinship relations. The positive associations argue against contentions that the Internet is alienating (541).
In terms of social contact (network capital), Wellman et al. suggest that using the Internet frequently does not substantially decrease using other communication media for contact with far-away friends and relatives (2002). This line of research is particularly encouraging when applied to virtual spaces such as video games, and specifically MMORPGs, in which players supplement in-game avatar-to-avatar contact within a virtual geography with text-based CMC on forums, which serve as an information hub for the meta-game—i.e., the community and culture of the virtual environment itself.

**Virtuality, Video Games, Immersion, and MMORPGs**

While literature on the virtual environment dates to the 1980s, with the term "cyberspace" coined by science-fiction author William Gibson in his book "Neuromancer" (1984), the terminology was popularized through cybernetics research. Based on the Greek word for "pilot" or "steersman," it connotes a self-steering system (Sheilds, 2003). With the consistent march of technology, computers and data-transfer methods have been able to improve the abilities of computers to render and run entire virtual worlds online, providing real-time interaction for those who “inhabit” these worlds.

What is a virtual world? Rob Shields, in his book The Virtual explains that the word means something "in essence" or "essentially so" (2003). The root is 'virtue' which comes from the Latin root *virtus* meaning strength or power (Shields, 2003). The idea of a virtue comes from the Platonic forms, or the ideals behind things. Virtual worlds exist on the threshold between the tangible and the iconic, creating a liminality that allows users to “feel” them without actually having them present in a purely physical sense. In this sense, virtuality is neither real nor unreal,
and reducing virtual worlds to a real/unreal binary is a mistake because of the very nature of virtuality— it does exist in essence. Shields points out that reality for psychologists and physiologists concerns an object which can be identified and verified by firsthand observers who perceive it (2003). Because of this interactive quality, among others, the popularity of videogames and virtual realities has grown exponentially, along with the technology that makes them possible. It has been proposed that video games are perhaps the newest form of popular art, and one of the most innovative inventions in the past century (Gee, 2008b).

Videogames, unlike most forms of media, are supremely interactive and require an active audience fully participating in a functional virtual environment. Burrill says that gaming is based on the identification of physical body and digital body as projected through space, and that the player serves as both spectator and audience to actions (2008). For Burrill, the player is considered a performer; the player is also implicated in the production of in-game events via the avatar and experiences hypermediacy, or hyper-conscious action/awareness, through this exchange (Burrill, 2008). In this framework, the videogame is envisioned as a place where multiple meanings are embodied and videogames, along with the virtual worlds they encompass, are considered a metaphor for an interactive subject moving along both internal space, external space, and ideological space (Burrill, 2008). Burrill (2008) questions the signifying power of videogames while suggesting that the players consume representations while performing through representation, or avatars, the player’s “active and visual prosthetic in the game.” Similarly, Gee and Bogost both approach video games as processes of meaning-making, a merging of game space, or the virtual realm, the player’s immersion in the virtual realm through actions, and the game’s designer, which provides the “rules” governing the virtual realm (Bogost, 2006, 2008; Gee, 2008a, 2008b). It is these shared meanings between game, designer, and gamer that
create the meta-game, or the culture surrounding the game and gaming itself. Thousands of forums and publications are available to inform and satisfy these communities’ needs and desires for information, interaction and integration, making the gaming community one of the fastest growing, and most wired, communities in the digital age.

While there are many types of video games with varying degrees of player involvement, WoW, the focus of this paper, is unique in the fact that it combines the procedural meaning-making of gameplay described by Burrill, Bogost and Gee with the social emphasis of online communities. Similar to other technologies which mediate communication, WoW facilitates real-time information transfer and meaning-making among its users. It grew from text-based MUDs, or multi-user dungeons, which sprang up before advanced graphics rendering technology allowed graphically demanding content to be streamed over the Internet.

An MUD offered users a text-based mediated reality in which they re-create themselves and their roles online using chat-based CMC to interact (Schaaf, 2002). What WoW does differently is recreate what was merely text into a stunningly real virtual existence – a “place” called “Azeroth” – that runs constantly through cybernetics, or a self-steering system. This means that even though you might leave Azeroth, Azeroth does not stop functioning.

A virtual, cybernetic world such as WoW’s Azeroth is fluid: Just because a player “logs off” (exits the game), it does not mean that Azeroth or your avatar cease to exist until you return to the game. When users leave Azeroth to return to what is known as IRL (in real life) events they come back to a different world each time. Until the modern MMORPG, this level of realism in gaming was unheard of. Video games up to this point have been a user-paced medium, meaning that players can press a button and pause the game to get a soda, or save their progress and return to it later, unchanged and waiting. The fact that the world is fluid and players
themselves are immersed within, may make it easier for relationships and communities to form much as they would in real life, around shared interests and common meanings. Yet these relationships and the meanings they grow from are, in a sense, not real. Such is the quandary of virtuality and community: how far does the virtual reach into the real?

Community in MMORPGs

Currently, one may think of Azeroth as a virtual world, in which players live out heroic identities (Boone, 2008). The virtual landscape acts as the geographical area in which players meet, and which forms the geographic element of the community. The game’s rules, set up by game designers, provide the structure for community and the players residing in WoW undergo the process of meaning-making to form shared realities within the game. WoW players are a distinct group of people with shared interests, backgrounds, in-game geographical areas or cultures interacting through the use of CMC (Squire, 2006). Some researchers even compare players in MMORPGs to citizens in a nation state, in which the geography and “rules” of the game, as well as the communities within the game, are constantly in flux, with this change being a consequence of the conflict among players and designers over meaning (Smith, 2006). In this framework, players within an MMORPG are much like citizens in a community, as defined by Lowrey et al. (2008) and Kim & Ball-Rokeach (2001): the geography would be the game itself, and the culture, shared interests, and the ongoing negotiation over these are inherently linked to the playing of the game (Pirius, 2007).

Specifically, within WoW, players unite to form guilds, or groups of like-minded players that use teamwork to advance through tougher areas of the world (Gibson, 2008). Technically, guilds are groups of real people working through avatars to accomplish goals and form
relationships within the boundaries of WoW’s virtual realm. Others point out that WoW, specifically, does allow players to create and maintain a “heroic identity” through their avatars, but this does not necessarily free them from performing real-world social roles and succumbing to real-world social pressures within the virtual world (Boone, 2008).

Recent research into guild play suggests players do form, and feel, a unique sense of community when playing online. Perhaps one of the reasons that WoW is so popular is that it forces its players to be social. Guilds are necessary for progression in the game, and being a member of an elite guild can command respect on the server that the user plays on (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell & More, 2007a).

The fact that WoW is goal-based and that these goals almost always require one to be a participating member in a group of players makes WoW an inherently social game. Guilds often gravitate toward small, close-knit communities of players because of the trust and teamwork needed to progress through increasingly difficult goals (Ducheneaut, et al. 2007a). Further, guilds, like individual players, must operate within the written codes of the game, giving guild members a virtual heritage that makes social learning possible (Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Zhang, Yee & Nickell, 2006). The rules of Azeroth are different from the rules of everyday life, with the most obvious difference being the fantasy elements such as magic or video game elements such as avatar customization. For this reason, WoW players engaging in social activities through guild life operate within a unique set of norms determined largely, but not exclusively, by the rules of WoW. Guild research by Williams, et al. suggests guild communities may form and grow, and may decline and disappear. Many small guilds are formed by family or a small group of close friends, and then expand to include other players of similar interests (2006). Guilds, large and small, either thrive or fail based on participation, trust and sociability,
with larger guilds often breaking down into smaller guilds, sometimes because of the weak ties created within the larger community structure.

Ducheneaut, Moore and Nickell (2007b) point out that one can compare a game’s virtual spaces to Oldenburg’s ideal real-life social spaces. Ducheneaut, et al. use another MMORPG, Star Wars Galaxies (SWG), to examine how virtual environments can promote sociability, a key concept in Oldenburg’s (1999) theory, which states that society and communities are held together by a general sense of social well-being, or the ability of the community to meet and mingle on an informal basis. This informal social life is aided by what he calls third places, or public meeting spaces that act as neutral ground, providing an informal atmosphere ripe for casual socializing. Because of similarities among all MMORPGs the observations made in SWG apply across virtual spaces, whether they are a galaxy far, far away or closer to home. One key concept in the argument of sociability is the interrelated nature of player professions. In SWG, players can have professions that their avatars can learn in order to make money and advance skill levels. These professions often require items from other professions to advance, and this mutual dependency leads players to nurture viable relationships with other players in order to progress (Ducheneaut, et al. 2007b).

Similarly, in WoW, players’ professions often depend on other players. Enchanters, who specialize in item enhancement, require goods from blacksmiths, who specialize in metallurgy. These professions also require players to foster relationships among one another in order to progress in the game. This, along with guild creation and management, led Ducheneaut, et al. and Williams, et al. to conclude that communities could exist within online environments by promoting sociability, although in an inherently different way than their real-life counterparts (2007b; 2006). Nardi and Harris (2006) also found that collaborative play affected people’s
enjoyment of the game, resulting in the formation of tight-knit groups. Soukup (2006) says online environments can offer highly satisfying social interactions despite the lack of face-to-face contact. This is in context with the idea that Oldenburg's third places can reduce stress and isolation by providing meaningful social connection. He also suggests that research into CMC and community implies that, if operated correctly, online communities may actually help reverse alienation and disconnectedness that is associated with the post-industrial world (Soukup, 2006).

**Research Questions**

The concepts of the public and the public sphere are central to this study. The concept of “public” is drawn from depictions by Habermas, Dewey and Park, and is here defined as a space of negotiated meaning-making where communication is open and rational; furthermore, a public works towards a shared understanding of norms, but one which is tolerant of change. The existence of a public is necessary for the idea that members of any kind of community shape their community through shared meaning, and that public media or public information sources enable this process, bringing the information needed to facilitate negotiation, solidify norms, bring about social cohesion and engagement and, lastly, civic engagement and an investment in social capital. When applied to a virtual world such as World of Warcraft, research suggests that communities may form and interact much in the same way as real-life communities. They may solidify and cohere, based on mutual dependencies and shared understandings. They may also make connections to other virtual communities, leading to community change.

If the public sphere and structure facilitating community are found within the WoW’s communities, then the game’s networked mediated information system may be a meso-macro
storyteller serving the communities within, both helping to reinforce norms and to create new meanings, and therefore structural change, within virtual communities, and across communities in the gamespace. Through the exploration of both the literature on community and the media, and current research into how communities form online and in a gaming environment, this exploratory study seeks to shed light on how players in virtual worlds, specifically an MMORPG like WoW, use information to shore up social cohesion and perhaps prevent social change, or how they may use information to foster social change.

The concepts of weak and strong ties are also central to the thesis. Granovetter (1973; 1983) posits that close-knit groups of individuals will form, being bound predominately by strong ties, and that weak ties will function as the crucial bridge between any two densely knit clumps of close friends, serving primarily to transmit and generate new information. This information exchange can lead to innovation and change in otherwise static social structures.

Research Questions

This study asks the following research questions:

RQ1: To what degree does the concept of a “public” apply to WoW communities?

RQ2: What are the public information sources, if any?

RQ3: How do public information sources affect guild community formation and dissolution?

RQ4: How do guilds, the building blocks of the community in WoW, spark social change in the meta-game by spreading information through a system of weak and strong ties that make up the larger server community?
Method

In order to better understand what made WoW so popular, the researcher decided not just to look at the game, but interact with it. The research methods chosen were qualitative interviews\(^1\) from a non-representative sample of guild leaders and council members, forum monitoring, and a loose participant observation conducted within the selected forum's corresponding server/realm.\(^2\)

Participant observation in a virtual, goal-based community requires that the researcher play the game alongside other players. The researcher observed the ways guild members interact, as well as the way guild communication is structured, specifically how different components of guilds communicate (for example, communication between centralized leadership and peripheral members, and between guilds). Using the results from interviews, forum monitoring and participant observation, the researcher investigated the nature of information, social pressure and change on an in-game level. Participant observation and ethnography are less about studying people and places and more about learning them, in other words, as opposed to “armchair anthropology”, the ethnographer can fully participate in an activity and does what others do in order to “become” one of the group (Spradley, 1980). Therefore, the research here involved

\(^1\) See Appendix A for Interview Questions

\(^2\) In WoW, the game is set up in a manner that separates players into separate realms, and each realm is housed on an individual server, or data mainframe, that a set number of players connect to. These realms/servers are commonly referred to as “server communities” because they form a semi-permanent home for a player (players can change servers for a cash fee if they don’t like it). Each realm has a corresponding forum, where the players who inhabit it can discuss the occurrences within the realm on a day to day basis. While realm and server are basically interchangeable terms when discussing community, purists point out that the realm is literally the space which players inhabit and the server is the hardware that houses the space. In this study, the realm/server and corresponding forum chosen was Kael’Thas.
active participation to the fullest extent while still maintaining an academic viewpoint. Frank Schaap (2002), an early ethnographer in the world of text-based MUDs recognized that in order to observe participants within the gamespace, the researcher must “become the ethnography.” In other words, one must play alongside the denizens of the realm in order to progress. The researcher started an avatar, in this case a female Blood Elf Paladin, from scratch and molded a high-level avatar who engaged in end-game raiding, a time-consuming and intense group activity often involving 10 to 40 players working toward a goal simultaneously. This allowed the researcher to better understand the norms and world views of serious players of the game.

The overall study length was one year. The amount of time spent per week was 20 to 30 hours. This large block of time is considered mandatory to be among an elite gaming circle. The researcher raided with and befriended a guild, running a high-level raid instance, which is similar to a complex obstacle course requiring the skills of multiple players, at least three nights a week for about four hours a night. This is on top of the amount of time played in order to level the avatar from one to the maximum level 80 (6 months at an average of 25 hours a week).

The researcher interviewed 10 different guild council members from 10 different-sized guilds. It was thought best to obtain a variety of guild sizes, as the “community size” of guilds could have an impact on communication patterns and the ways information is spread, because size tends to lead to hierarchy, and more complex communication structures. The guild classification was as follows: family guilds (which are built around real-life families with a membership of 2 or more), small guilds (2-20 players), medium guilds (20-40 players), large guilds (40-80 players) and mega guilds (80+ players). This rubric for guild classification was borrowed from a previous study on guild formation and dissolution conducted by Ducheneaut,
Yee, Nickell and Moore (2007). Two council members will be interviewed for each classification.

The researcher first contacted individuals based on the researcher’s knowledge of them from previous game play and participant observation. No sampling list of WoW players exists, making this method for initial contact necessary. Council members were then recruited through a “snowball sampling” method, where initial contacts recommended other players, and these players recommended other players, etc., based on the guild classifications listed above. The reason for this method is the concern many players have for Internet privacy and security; it is believed that interviewees were more comfortable being interviewed if a person they know has already completed the process.

Names of research participants were used in the study, and it was not possible to identify them in the write-up (their identity was not germane to the purpose of the study – only their roles). Any potential participant not wishing to take part was replaced, again through snowball sampling. Questions were administered through voice chat upon the researcher’s reception of the subjects’ completed forms. Participants were told that their participation was entirely voluntary and there was no penalty for not participating.

First, the researcher contacted individuals he knew from previous game play and participant observation. These individuals were asked to give recommendations for potential interviewees. Second, these prospective participants were contacted initially in-game by private message. Upon acceptance, the researcher obtained the in-game e-mail of the player. Third, the researcher sent an in-game e-mail message with the consent form. When the subject replied to the consent form positively then the researcher set up a time for a voice chat interview. Finally,
the interviewer, before beginning the voice chat interview, re-read the conditions of the consent form to the interviewee.

Once participants granted consent, the researcher asked 10 in-depth, semi-structured and open-ended, interview questions via in-game voice communication with players about their guild experiences, information-seeking habits and forum usage (See questions in Appendix A). All questions were asked, but additional issues were pursued if the context of the interview seemed to warrant straying from the list. Interviews typically lasted between 30 minutes and an hour, and were ended at the point interview responses began to become redundant.

As part of the participant observation section, in-game chat monitoring was conducted in order to better understand social interaction via observation of the general guild chat as well as global chat. The researcher learned the slang, etiquette and unspoken rules of social interaction with players on the server and made according notes/screenshots when interesting or pertinent subjects came up in either guild or global chat. Voice chatting was used in order to gain knowledge of how players interact through oral communication in real-time. The researcher engaged in voice-chatting with other players, often while accomplishing an objective alongside them. The researcher did this to understand how they worked together and how vocal messages were transmitted and received and how these might be differentiated from text-based communication.

Using a third-party software, known as Census Plus, the researcher was able to observe and monitor what races, classes, and factions were actively playing at any given point in the game. By denoting the popularity of certain races and classes, the researcher believed he could

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3 See Appendices B-D for screen-shot examples of the WoW Graphic User Interface (GUI) and some corresponding social tools.

4 Players in WoW essentially create an avatar and participate in a narrative storyline detailing the conflict between two factions within Azeroth. Each of these factions has separate races with unique features, and classes which determine what role the player will take in a group setting.
better understand the formation and dissolution of social structures which build up around them.

Forum monitoring was also conducted in order to determine how players and guilds disclosed their progression through the game and also to note the formation and dissolution of guilds. The researcher judged the degree to which WoW forums acted as a form of community media by assessing the degree to which a media source facilitates the process of community-building. The researcher assessed how well these information sources reveal the structures which aid in the process of meaning-making and how well the forums represent, and give voice to, the people of the community by providing a medium for self-expression and community-wide expression. By examining relevant posts, the researcher sought to gain a sense of (1) the degree to which these serve as a public information source, (2) how a public information source such as the forums aids the maintenance of community by helping maintain norms and cohesion on the one hand, or bring in new information and faster social change on the other. Forum monitoring is perhaps the most important methodology for this type of research. Not only does it give a general "feel" for the server itself (rivalries, friendships, disciplinary actions and personal news) it is also relatively static, and therefore easier to refer to than the chat channels or voice-chat servers, which all change very rapidly.

The researcher took extensive notes tracking both interaction with the environment and the community.

Findings

Through interviews, participant observations and forum data, several concerns involving the identification of public media sources and how they subsequently shape social change within
the server and within guilds themselves were noted. Below, data from the study as a whole are organized by research question.

RQ1. To what degree does the concept of a “public” apply to WoW communities?

Based on the concept of publics as discussed by Habermas, Dewey and Park, a “public” is viewed as relational space of negotiated meaning-making where communication is open and rational. Also, a public works towards a shared understanding of norms, but one which is tolerant of change. Much of the data pointed strongly toward the existence of an autonomous public within the public space of WoW and, on a smaller level, with specific guilds themselves. All of the participants agreed that their server, and especially their guild, was an interactive community and that they derived great social satisfaction from participating.

“I think guilds are very important because it adds that social aspect…you get to create your own little group that you click with,” said one participant. The players also agreed that the social aspects of the game, as well as the communication tools Blizzard offers players (chat, instant messaging and voice chat, all live in-game) gave them a space to socialize and "hang out," as one participant put it. "I don't always play, sometimes it’s just nice to come hang out [on the voice chat server] and talk," he said. These tools, along with cooperative game play, appear to give the participants the space to negotiate norms and relationships within the guild and the server, as well as provide spaces for both the political "act" of forming alliances and playing the game and the commentary and analysis surrounding these acts, where common cultural meaning is solidified through discussion. This evidence seems to suggest a public space through which
groups of people work through intersubjective meaning-making, rational discussion and the
exploration and negotiations of norms.

The relationships within guilds and within servers, where guilds compete for rank, are
distinctly political in that they seek alternately to preserve and change power structures. The
interviews revealed that guild leaders do in fact see WoW and the server they interact in as their
community. They view WoW, both within their microcosmic guild boundaries and the
macrocosm of the server itself, as a public space in which they join and leave groups, or publics,
which often have different goals and play styles. They see guilds as major agents of change
within the game both for individual players and on a server-wide level. All participants agreed
that WoW, and specifically their guild, provided them with a stable and fulfilling community.
They also agreed that both WoW and the forums were intrinsic to the success of the game.
However, the levels of interaction and, more specifically, the balance between strong and weak
ties within a guild were directly related to their size and focus of the guild.

For instance, guild leaders in small guilds tended to try and keep them small, with
relatively close personal tie. Many small and family guild participants said they liked to “know
people by name” and recognized that “people in the guild have real lives.” They felt, as whole
that their guilds were “close” and used phrases like “relaxed,” “friendly,” and “no-pressure” to
describe their guilds. These indicate that participants in smaller guilds formed strong ties with
each other and all shared the same ideology when it came to game-play, namely, a casual
approach. Members of larger guilds were more hierarchical in their approach to running the
guild, and used phrases like “hardcore,” “efficient,” and “progression-oriented” to describe the
social atmosphere in their guild; in other words, they were at a more serious level of play.
There was a distinct split in the language used to describe relationships, hierarchies, desired traits and overall “friendliness” between guilds that described themselves as casual and guilds that described themselves as serious, and these differences influenced the way public discourse and the space in which it resides were used by different guilds. In conjunction, the perceived conflicts both within and between "serious" and "casual" guilds, along with the play style and ideologies attached to both, suggest strong and weak ties are valued differently within each ideological and social framework. Granovetter (1973;1983) postulates that close-knit groups of individuals are bound by strong ties, and that weak ties will function as the crucial bridge between any two densely knit clumps of close friends, transmitting and generate new information. This information exchange can lead to innovation and change in otherwise static social structures. While there are undoubtedly multiple publics forming and dissolving around issues within WoW's greater public sphere, the conflict and change brought about by the tensions between "serious" and "casual" guilds, and the differences in their social structures and ties, were identified as prominent, and will be a focus of this section.

Casual guilds tended to seek members who would help augment the bonding process between guild members, e.g., players who "fit in" or players who were not necessarily interested in the guild's raiding progress, but who were more attuned to the requirements that the guild be cohesive. One participant, a council member for a casual family guild said:

It doesn’t often have to do with any set of skills as far as playing goes. It has to do with social skills, maybe just talking or chatting with people, you know? A personality that you like or other people like, maybe someone good to talk to. Or maybe being nice. That’s just in smaller guilds. It may
not be the same, you know, in a guild that’s more of a raiding guild, where they may look at other skills like gear level and raiding skills, ability to follow instructions, organization and other stuff per se.

The assumption that "hardcore guilds," in which raid attendance, or a player's attendance to group activities, is priority, are often more socially conservative -- i.e. the members are not concerned with getting to know one another. This was most common among small, casual guilds. However, when pressed, the guild leaders of small guilds admitted they often did not know everyone in their guild. One participant said, “I feel like I know some people really well, but others not so much. It really goes on an individual basis.”

This response was more or less echoed by the four participants who occupy leadership positions in small and family guilds. Occupying positions of power, they felt as if they have more control over the social environment. “I have always had a fair amount of clout. There was one instance where I didn’t have very much at all [in a large guild], but in [my current guild] I have probably had the most,” one stated. Because the leadership roles in a small guild are often more concentrated, with one to four players governing recruitment, activities and resources, small guild leaders often expressed more confidence in their ability to influence others and the direction of the guild as a whole. However, they also said small guild dynamics were more democratic in the decision-making process since the officers were "friendly and more approachable." For example, most of the leaders of casual guilds said they were interested in progression, but not at the expense of the social atmosphere that makes casual guilds live up to their name. This openness in communication suggests aspects of Habermas’ public, which is not dominated by top-down coercion and influence.
“We want to progress…but when it comes down to it we don’t yell at each other, we don’t back talk to each other. There are some guilds that run 6 nights a week with mandatory attendance and you get yelled at but we don’t do that. We are a casual guild who is serious about progression,” said a guild leader of a large guild that defined itself as both casual and serious.

“Our main rule in the guild is no drama. We all are over the age of 18 and we all have jobs and school and stuff so when people sign on we don’t want to get berated or make people feel like they have more responsibility here than they have in the real world, because for a lot of people the real world is kind of depressing.”

Overall, leaders in casual guilds valued social cohesion over achievement and inclusiveness over elitism. Some said if their guild became serious, they would leave. One leader of a small casual guild stated, “I would leave a guild ...maybe, because of an atmosphere change [or from] getting new people who start cursing or other stuff.” The majority of the respondents in casual guilds had moved to different guilds several times for just those reasons. One participant said that when a guild changed, it was easy to leave. By selecting members carefully and discouraging the proliferation of ties outside the guild, many casual guilds seem to eschew change for stability, both socially and ideologically.

During the period of observation, the researcher found that often conflict caused by different ideologies attached to hardcore and casual guilds resulted in small-scale social change. Players who started out in casual guilds were often not as geared or as well-versed in raiding strategies as those in larger, more hardcore guilds. Thus, many leaders of casual guilds are former hardcore raiders, themselves. What they bring to the casual guild is invaluable: their gear and experience brings the ability to progress through new content, albeit at a slower pace, and prevents stagnation.
For example, one player left his spot as a relatively important member of a hardcore guild to take a more powerful position in a smaller, less powerful guild. Thus, he made the conscious decision to shed power on the macro level (his status on the server was diminished without the backing of a powerful guild) in order to gain closer ties at the micro level by helping out a small, close-knit guild. His decision was largely based on the “weak ties” he made – i.e., the interactions and subsequent friendships he formed with members outside his raiding guild. He was an asset to the smaller guild because of his abilities and experience. However, his gains were more intangible: an increased feeling of closeness, or, a gain in strong ties with fellow players and guildmates.

Through the ties he formed with more powerful players during his stint as a hardcore raider, he was able to help the casual guild grow and progress successfully through his constant accrualment of new strategies, and he himself was happier with the social, laid-back environment. The constant shift of hardcore players to smaller, more laid-back guilds is a trend in WoW, perhaps due to the pressure of performing four to six nights a week, often for many hours at a time. More mature players often dropped out of hardcore guilds due to "burnout," and while rarely leaving the game, they opted to participate in a lower-profile, more social approach to playing. Social cohesion is valued by the casual player as being key to a successful guild setup.

Serious guilds, on the other hand, had a much different idea of which traits made up a successful guild. Participants in serious guilds were often very short with the interviews and were much more distracted during the process because they were focused on playing during the interview time. Out of the four leaders who ran serious guilds there was an even split between mega and large guilds. Their demeanor was different, as well. Their answers were shorter, and
often more flippant, and they were much more guarded with their personal and guild information.

When asked what traits they looked for in guild members, the answers were nearly identical across all four participants: gear, experience, availability and the ability to follow orders. Put succinctly by a raid leader in a large serious guild:

“I think it’s important that people don’t fucking waste our time, or their own time. They need to show up, have read their character’s specs and watched the strategy videos on the fight and just be ready to not fuck up. Because when you have one person who doesn’t want to perform it wastes 25 people's night, or even week. So if you don’t show up ready, you will get booted from the raid until you decide to show up on time. We always make sure we have enough backup raiders to replace the hardcore set who get lazy, and we will replace you. But the thing is, we all know this and we are all friends here. I guess we have an understanding.”

One participant, a raid leader in a large serious guild, told the story of a player who was unfortunate enough to be caught playing Peggle, an in-game puzzle meant to pass time, during a raid. The player was publicly demoted to rank "Peggetard," meant to be an insult, and a guild announcement was made, saying: "Peggetard crits you for 5000, your raid invite is resisted." In other words, player's raid privileges were revoked publicly, as well. Every time the player logged on, this derisive message greeted him until he finally left the guild. "After he left, we made a
rank called [Player's name]. It's as low as you can go. You don't wanna be that guy if you screw up," the participant said, laughing.

Most of the guild leaders did not see a problem with harsh discipline in their guild. "We are here to get through the content. That's what we pay for and we don't need people who aren't serious about it. It's all about what you want in the game; if you want a glorified chat room go to a casual. If you want to raid, and I mean really raid, you come to a hardcore guild," stated the guild leader of a mega-guild.

In some ways, harsh discipline and strict hierarchy may not seem in harmony with the ideals of open discussion and meaning-making that defines a public. While there was diversity in the casual guilds, their serious neighbors were more regimented with their approaches to negotiation of norms and problem solving within the guild community. Failure was looked down upon, and most of the participants said their guild chat was largely game-centered with little personal information shared. Their approach was largely hierarchical, with decision-making and information largely following the top-down approach and its dissemination among lower ranks mostly up to the guild master and the council. Almost all decisions were based on performance; when asked what would make them leave their guild, the responses from participants in serious guilds differed greatly from the casual guild leaders. Most said they would leave if there was no more raid viability in their guild, or because of frequent failures. Such an atmosphere does not seem highly conducive to open discussion in a “public sphere.”

As a result, many serious guilds are much more open to a high player turnover. They tend to favor the initiation of weak ties among many players in order to create a broader circle from which to recruit from. They also are more likely to reach out to the server and add new individuals to the guild, provided these individuals can help them progress. Progression is
essentially competition (sometimes friendly, sometimes not) and seeks to upset and change the status quo on the server by gaining achievements or rank, and thus gaining the benefits that come with a higher profile on the server. In this they are more open to the generation of weak ties and change within the guild if it is deemed beneficial for initiating change on the server as a whole. In this respect only, the larger hardcore guilds are arguably closer to the definition of a public, in that they welcome renegotiation of norms within the guild and outside of it. But it is clear from observing and interviewing hardcore guilds, that this openness to change is not a reflection of open discussion in the public sphere. Discussion is more regimented and typically less free than in the casual guilds.

In the end, most participants echoed the assumptions that guilds, the microcosms which inhabit the larger space of the server community, are small publics within themselves, each striving for different goals with different "feels." This feeling often amounted to an ideology on how to play, and while there is rarely open contention between these ideologies, on a smaller scale they become visible through the act of playing the game. On one hand, there is the social aspect of the MMORPG, were one requires others to get things done, and on the other there is the individual act of making decisions about how to play and equip your avatar. Gear and rank garner respect from players; however, there is a price to pay for obtaining them, namely time and the often elitist culture that surrounds hardcore play style.

In the end, casual players nurtured an atmosphere that favored strong ties and tended to resist change, and these players were rarely able to see all of the high-end content. Turnover within the guild was largely due to frustration at not being able to get things done--players that took the time to play and gear up left their comrades to join more serious guilds. Discussion was more open in casual guilds, but while this may have nurtured more social cohesion, it did not
seem to open the guild up to “change” any more than with the hardcore guilds. And in fact, in some ways hardcore guilds, by establishing connections via “top-down” forms of communication, actually reached out more beyond their own guilds, and therefore changed more.

Players who experienced burnout due to the demands of hardcore playing often abandoned a less-cohesive guild to join one focused more on close relationships. These two clearly defined groups with two different ideologies offered clear paths to players based on their own play style and individual values. Changing play styles and values often means switching ideologies and guilds, and along with that comes some conflict. In closing, these ideologies, among others, form a constantly shifting landscape of publics which form, recede and overlap within the space of Azeroth and WoW.

RQ2. What are the public information sources, if any?

There was a unanimous agreement among the participants that forums played a very strong role in the dissemination of information, both social and technical. Observation of both gameplay and forums backed the participants’ viewpoints, with forums largely serving to facilitate the exchange of technical and social information on guild level, server level, and game-wide level. This information exchange serves to both reinforce norms (such as policing players who act distastefully) and promoting social change, such as announcing new guild formations or guild dissolutions to the server community. In this sense, forums within the game seemed to serve loosely as a form of community media.

With some guilds, there was a notable preference for obtaining information from third-party sites, or sites that are not Blizzard-affiliated but still host and exchange information about
the game. Once again, this preference often depended on the guild's size and orientation. Despite not being server-centered (i.e. they are not solely dedicated to the guilds residing on a certain server) these sites were viewed equally as valid community sites and preferred sites for gameplay-based decision making – for example, how to defeat a certain raid encounter to progress in the game. However, the Blizzard "realm forums" – forums provided by Blizzard for players on specific servers – were still preferred for debating and explicating guild-related concerns on the server. This was especially the case among the larger, more serious guilds.

All guild interview participants said information sources were intrinsic to playing the game and also helpful for making decisions and navigating social and political sectors within the game. For large guilds, knowing what their rivals were doing was important. One participant, a raid leader in a serious guild said, "We are neck and neck with Surprise Fail [a derogatory play on the rival guild's name] right now. They have one hardmode [a particular fight with increased difficulty] on us, but we have more achieves [feats within a raid that often require skill and organization]. So we need to see what they are doing."

Many casual guild leaders preferred to use third-party sites rather than the Blizzard forums. "I hardly ever visit the [Blizzard] forums," one participant in a family guild said. "I might drop in every once in a while to see what's going on, kind of like reading a newspaper." Others expressed fear of posting on the forums with their progression. One guild master in particular avoided the forums for fear of external pressure: "We don't post what we've done. I mainly get information on guild rankings from other sites like Wowjutsu or Warcrafter [popular third-party ranking sites]. Putting yourself out there is asking to get flamed [attacked]." In this way, the Blizzard realm forums, which deal specifically with community news on the server, act as public information sources for the enforcement of norms and sharing of information while
third party ranking sites are anonymous, and often deal with more general information about the game as a whole – information that may lead to more social change rather than cohesion.

The guild Purgatory Knights was the subject of a flame attack by the server after two members "ninjaed" rare epic drops from other, non-guild, members of the raid. “Ninjaing” loots essentially mean stealing them through deception. When a piece of gear drops from a raid encounter, it is rolled on by players who need it to upgrade their avatar. A roll is simply a virtual die, which generates a random number. The player with the highest roll wins the gear being rolled on. This gear gives the player stats, or statistics, which make his or her avatar able to contribute more to the raid party and the guild, thus increasing status. Stealing loot that is not an upgrade from players who need it is a grave offense. In response to several posts identifying members of Purgatory Knights as ninja looters, a guild leader felt the need to defend his guild, posting this on the Kael'thas forums:

I cannot stress how deeply sorry I am for the actions that these former guild members have taken. We had been under suspicion that Thuixz and Killuminatti were not the right fit for our guild. Earlier today on our guild forums I made a post outlining any type of behavior that might not be acceptable in our guild. These two felt this post was geared towards them and this angered them. We have been notified that the "ninja loot" was an intentional act to sully our (Purgatory Knights) name. Again both of these

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5 Loot and gold are two forms of currency in WoW. Gold is used to purchase items and loot is usually gear that can be used to upgrade a player’s avatar. Both gold and loot “drop” from raid encounters when they are successfully completed, but they are random, and often players wait for months to get a piece of gear. Loot that can only be obtained from a specific raid encounter are called drops, and they are often rare and valuable.
members were swiftly removed from the guild. This was NOT a guild run. These 2 former members did this for the reason stated above and that reason alone. Once again we are very sorry for those that were wronged.

Purgatory Knights itself was a split-off guild from the larger guild HRU, which had a reputation for strict discipline and often uneven resource distribution among members. Because Purgatory Knights was attacked early on in its inception because of its members' poor behavior, it was in danger of becoming unstable. It used the forums as a public tool for addressing the server community with an apology. As a result, they received accolades from other guilds.

"Props for booting them immediately upon learning of the ninja looting. That definitely shows your guild has good leadership and class," said one respondent to the public apology. The guild used the forums, successfully, to defend their reputation by publicizing the thieves and also by respectfully apologizing for the offense. This post also had a direct effect on the server community. After doing a character search for the two thieves identified in the report, no such avatars were found on Kael'thas, meaning they either changed their names or left the server. The information essentially was used to enforce norms on the server, by revealing deviant behavior and reinforcing "good" behavior.

On this note, the realm server is also a harsh judge to those guilds and players who do not choose to take action which coincides with norms and expectations for in-game conduct. While this harshness can limit open communication, communication may be quite spirited, and it is clear that communication is sufficiently “public” to bring about meaningful change and negotiation over norms and norm violations. One primary example is a thread dedicated to a guild called The Rapture, which was one of the oldest and most revered guilds on the server. The
Rapture itself was a large, hardcore raiding guild with a knack for clearing content quickly and effectively. As such, it was well-respected on the server. However, one of its members was accused of ninjaing resources on a non-guild run by a member of Bloodline, a newer, smaller, but well-respected guild. Instead of having the accused thief issue an apology, Aeres, the guild leader of The Rapture, attacked the accuser:

"Considering Salothas has never been a problem before and was told we didn't want to hear QQ about him allegedly showing his @$@ or else he could find greener pastures is sufficient for us. Between his real life friends here and those that have known him forever I'm going to take his word for it on this occasion. If it becomes a chronic legit problem then we'd probably boot for the sheer purpose of not hearing innane whining -- that's OBVIOUSLY my job. KKGG."

The response from the server was swift, and the overall tone of the thread, which included over 99 individual posts and 876 views, was largely negative toward The Rapture. One poster succinctly summed up the tone of the thread: "Everyone here seems to be missing the underlying point of the thread: Bunch of horde [a faction in WoW] are saying Rapture peeps are ninjas and their integrity is slipping! Aeres [is] flipping everyone off cause she don't give a shit."

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6 Runs are essentially raids. A guild run means that only guild members are allowed to participate. A non-guild run means members from multiple guilds participate. There are unspoken rules for obtaining loot in a non-guild run and breaking them is considered a grave violation of norms within the community.

7 QQ is an internet meme for “cry more, noob” and essentially translates to “pointless whining.”

8 KKGG stands for “Okay, good going.”
After several pages of attacks on The Rapture, the original poster went into more detail:

My post was just to inform of what had partaken [sic]. With hopes that there would be actions to correct what had transpired. (A simple apology to all those that were involved from Salothas and an officer would have been enough.) I did not call for someone being removed from the guild but that this be known. I had made an attempt to contact him and made an attempt to contact someone but no one was on. .. . Also people tend to assume that a member of The Rapture has high standards and cares about their image and the image they represent. Your actions in representing this right now only shows me and others that you apparently care not about that integrity or care are issues at hand that involve the guild. Your statement here also discloses you not only endorse these actions but only would remove people if you are tired of hearing complaints. Thank you for this enlightening information to the server about how you handle even the smallest of issues.

The original poster touches on several important points, one being that powerful guilds are expected to set a tone, for example, for the rest of the server. The forums themselves served as a venting tool for the community at large, many of whom felt that The Rapture was overstepping its boundaries as a powerhouse on the server and abusing their privileges.

Members of The Rapture who had originally posted in the thread to defend Salothas, the member who was accused of stealing, were suddenly alarmed at the volume of negative posts the
thread had stirred up and several tried to offer remunerative statements both to the original poster and the server. However, the damage was done. Guilds that command respect through achievement are expected to operate in the public eye, and thus are also expected to maintain high ethical standards. In not responding appropriately to the public, The Rapture's perceived slights were dealt with publicly on the realm forums, resulting in an embarrassing and reputation-damaging situation. The Rapture was unaware that their members had been generating collective wrath through their interactions with others on the server, the weak ties outside the guild, through which the news of the alleged thievery spread, resulted in social change on the server, and a renegotiation of norms, specifically that The Rapture was a "good," ethical guild. This exchange suggests communication is open and public enough to lead to meaningful pressure on even the most powerful guilds.

The Kael'thas realm forums, however, are not the sole method for exchanging information throughout the community. Since they are realm-specific they are certainly the most public when concerning matters that affect the server. Yet often for smaller guilds, it appeared that allowing information into the greater realm of the server, and thus generating weak ties among "non-guildies," could pose a threat to the status quo within the smaller guild. Similarly, most leaders in small to medium-sized guilds said they did not post "recruitment threads" (topics on Blizzard realm forums advertising openings within the guild) for fear of "random" people joining, thus changing the social makeup and overall "feel" of the group, which could point to a fear of social change.

All 10 of the participants said that the forums, both third-party and Blizzard-affiliated, were extremely important to the game and its functions. "You have to keep up to date with what is going on," said one participant, a raid leader in a serious guild. "Not everybody has the time to
do this stuff all day, so it's nice when you can go [to the forums] and find what you need in 5 minutes." A small minority of participants, mostly from serious guilds, said it was important to keep up with guild rankings as well as the "drama" that occurred across the server, occurrences which are often aired and resolved through the Blizzard realm forums. Third-party forums were not monitored in this study, however, through observation and interview results, it was evident that they are also very effective in distributing information, although they do not deal specifically with the server/realm community and the ties within that that community. They do, however, distribute information about how to play the game, and thus also function as facilitators within the public sphere. Thus, smaller guilds monitor forums, but interact less in them. While using them for bringing new information into the guild, they do not reach out, essentially guarding against change, whereas hardcore guilds are more likely to actually interact within the realm forums and progression threads in order to progress/change.

**RQ3. How do public information sources affect guild formation and dissolution?**

The answers given by participants were mixed concerning the forum's effects on guild formation and dissolution. All participants said they used forums of various kinds to obtain and share information about the game, their guild or their experiences; however, they seemed hesitant to list the Blizzard realm forums (or third-party forums) as a reason for a guild forming or dissolving.

Small guild leaders were especially reluctant to attribute any sort of social change within their guild to participation on the forums, probably due to their previously cited reluctance to use them. However, this silence and fear of public interaction of the realm forums signifies that
forums do possibly contribute to a guild's collective social stability and the strength of the ties that hold it together. Reaching out, for some guild decision makers, meant unwanted pressures and change. When participants cited their experiences with guild dissolution, social change within the guild itself was almost always cited as a primary reason. Often, this social change was the direct result of external or internal pressure, external being outside stresses, such as the need for progression or reputation on the server, internal being social shifts that cause friction between competing ideals or play styles within the guild itself.

For example, four participants explained that when their guild broke up, its former members were often "headhunted" or "ninjaed" by larger guilds who had been applying external pressure to key, often well-geared players who formed the core group within the guild. Here we again see the coercion and constraints the larger hardcore guilds bring to the public communication across the game. If they buckled and left, some participants said, often the guild folded. In this manner, by cultivating weak ties with outsiders, private guild information concerning issues within the guild could be used by others to weaken the strong ties holding it together. Also, generating new ties through the forums can result in disaster. In the previous sections, participants pointed out that recruitment threads could bring in new members who did not fit the "feel" of the guild. One player who does not fit the ideology of the style of play in a guild can destroy the guild by essentially inciting change within the guild’s internal social structure.

One story, related through the forums, is that of a single player destroying a guild. It began as a simple advertisement of the realm forum: "High DPS [damage-dealing] hode mage looking for a good guild" in which the player, Deadwigit, listed his accolades and asked if any guilds were recruiting. However, he posted while still a member of his old guild, Church of Zug.
The post implied that because he was looking for a good guild, his current one was bad. Church of Zug had been a charter member of the Zug Alliance, with several other well-respected guilds on the server, and at the time of the post, it was struggling to hold itself together, and members were leaving. Players of the server immediately jumped Deadwigit. The thread, originally meant as a "personal ad" to guilds on the server, turned into a disjointed narrative of how the player had destroyed Church of Zug. The thread had over 1,000 views and 107 individual posts totaling over 6 pages.

One member of Untested Tactics, a guild that formed out of Church of Zug's demise posted, sarcastically:

Thanx for the support in your decision to join us DW [Deadwigit], but you're just a little cocky. I'm not slamming you or anything close, but you need to understand that you have to play well with others...What really shakes me is your quick turn to look for another guild. I don't think that speaks very well of you to show your tail at the first sign of trouble, because any larger scale raiding guild is gonna be a lot more difficult and demanding; And you're not making yourself to be a very good candidate for anyone. But you may have to start looking for another home regardless.

Another poster was more blunt:
You speak of hurt and lies DW [Deadwigit], pot this is my good friend kettle. Every night I would log onto vent [voice chat] to hear the CoZ [Church of Zug] refugees whine about how much it sucked to raid with you...The mess you caused back then even had some of the raiders worried about the direction of the guild. I am still staggered that Tetask and Tahfrek managed to hold CoZ together during your tenure…when a guild hopping idiot flops into view I feel a need to open fire.

The realm forums are effective in policing the community, and it appears the more powerful guilds tend to bring coercion into the public discussion across the game. In the end, this thread destroyed Deadwigit's personal reputation on the server, and he was not picked up by a major raiding guild. In fact, he left Kael'thas entirely and reportedly quit playing altogether. More importantly, the drama surrounding Deadwigit also dealt the final blow to Church of Zug, causing it to fall apart completely. But this thread, and those like it, also illustrates how one player was recruited from the outside and contributed to the downfall of an entire guild, and how public information aided this change. Consequently, other guilds on the server had to absorb the "refugees" either because of need or because they respected Church of Zug, thus causing a significant ripple in the social and political landscape of Kael'thas, as denoted by the length and interest in the thread.

The forum served not only as an alarm bell, revealing a possible problem player, but it also helped to protect the internal stability of other recruiting guilds from a possible "bad apple," thus also protecting the integrity of guilds who might have recruited the player. The realm forum also served to communicate and shore up general norms of the larger game, offering what
happened to Church of Zug as a "public lesson," thereby helping to maintain the stability of the
culture of the larger game community. Again, norms were regulated via both public discussion
and coercion via the stronger guilds, suggesting both openness and constraint in the game’s
public sphere.

Also, the examples given in the previous section concerning The Rapture and Purgatory
Knights illuminate how the realm forums serve as community media in that they are storytellers
for the community. Purgatory Knights’ story was redemptive. The Rapture’s was not. Both
stories helped the server community give voice to itself and shore up the values and norms of the
larger communities by identifying deviant behaviors. The forums also would help an outsider get
a grasp of the power structures and politics and norms within the community, as well. There are
hundreds of stories posted every day on the realm forums, and by examining them, one can get a
glimpse of how a server works: Who are the public figures? Who are the upright citizens, the
leaders, and who are the thieves and naysayers? What was not noted was the resulting changes
on the server due to these stories becoming available for all.

Purgatory Knights, because of their response, grew as a guild. When last checked, they
had risen from raiding smaller instances to participating in large raids numbering 25 people or
more. Their recruitment posts largely had positive responses and their progression posts in the
guild progression threads on the realm forums revealed they were moving quickly through the
content.

The Rapture, however, slipped from their top spot on the server. They also lost several
important members, including their main raid leader. The Rapture, as a result, drew into itself in
order to survive, walling itself off from external communication or (weak) ties, and becoming
conspicuously absent from the forums. Because of this withdrawal, they survived as a guild, but the general consensus on the server was that they went through a rough patch.

What is shared on the realm forums is essentially the result of weak ties forming networks across the server. Whether a guild is private or public, some information leaks out through their members' interactions with friends and acquaintances on the server or within the guild. This information can either help or hurt the guild (or a group of players within the guild) increasing either instability or solidarity, depending on its nature.

**RQ4. How do guilds themselves, the building blocks of the community in WoW, spark social change in the meta-game by spreading information through a system of weak and strong ties that make up the larger server community?**

Out of the 10 participants, all had posted or interacted with forums about the game, either through Blizzard or third-party forums (or both), and all of them felt as if the forums formed a major part of the game. All guild leaders agreed the information found in the forums helped them make decisions about their own personal styles of gameplay, and eight said they believed that major guild decisions were often based on information accessed on the forums. Despite the differences between the ways serious and casual guilds use the forums, all participants said they had used the forums at least once to share information. As far as using the forums to make decisions, all of the leaders said that either the Blizzard forums or third-party forums had helped them make big decisions in their guilds. These decisions are the results of information passing along weak ties throughout the social network of the server or game, finally ending up as public information through the community media source provided by various forums.
In a sense, these weak communication ties lead to a general, almost collective knowledge of the game and how it is played, among players. One participant said, "You have to know what you are dealing with before you go in there [to raid] and you need to know about a server before you join. Whether or not you are progressing may not be important to your guild, but it’s important for someone who may want to join," said one participant. "So it’s good to know that stuff is out there for you to use if you want. That’s what the forums are for. I think it changes a lot how the game is played because we can get to know it [the game] better.”

Information can take many forms, from advice on equipping and playing avatars to server gossip. The example cited in the preceding section relating to how, specifically, the realm forums serve as a sounding board and storyteller for the server community, reveals only one side of this information, namely, that which contains social and political information about conflict and change within the server. For example, a guild's actions can align with a specific set of ideologies or goals, casual or serious, and thus align it with a public within the game. Its overall reputation as a serious or casual guild is spread throughout the server by those people who interact casually with the guild as a whole or its members. Thus, often unknowingly, a guild's reputation is created through the information passed through weak ties.

All of this information comes in the form of a thread posted by one person, however, these threads grow with each individual post and view, with each poster adding his or her two cents to the argument. Information garnered through hundreds of weak ties is deposited in thousands of threads a year on one server alone, and millions across the meta-game surrounding WoW. The realm forums deal almost entirely with guild news, and are the main sources for progression news and social/political speculation about the guilds and their interactions within the server. So how many different types of guilds are on a server (serious or casual) is commonly
known, both through general information within the game, and the storytelling function of the forums. This information helps to shape and maintain a general "self-perception" a server community has about itself.

For example, one participant said guilds are the main cause for a "feel," or social environment, within a server. He made the distinction between a "mature" server, a "young" server and a "dead" server. "Mature servers aren't as mean spirited. They have been around, most of the time, since vanilla [original] WoW and survived the expansions [changes in game play and the virtual world]. So that's why I like Kael'thas — it's mature. Young servers are meaner.

Everyone wants to progress as fast as possible to catch up with the old guys. So you either end up with them [the young servers] surviving, or going dead because everyone leaves," he said. “I found it very easy to move from guild to guild, actually…but that was mainly because I already knew people in the guild I was going to. So it was really just hanging out with a different set of friends, actually."

Like guilds, players often made social decisions based on their self-perceptions. One example highlights the difference between what one participant called "mature" players and "newbs," or players new to the game. "I think when you play more, you meet more people across the server; you run with them and stuff, so it easy to move around. New players rush and want to progress, and I do too, but I would rather do it slowly with friends," he said. The longer a player participated on a server, the more weak ties he generates, enabling social movement. The longer a server has been around, the more mature players it has. These mature players form a stable social backbone in the server, acting as "elders" of sorts who keep the power balances stable and lend cohesion to the overall game environment, and to some degree policing boundaries of the public discussion (though their control is limited and always subject to change).
These power balances are played out on a grand scale through community media, such as the realm forums and others, which facilitate open discussion. The strong ties which hold guilds together are often formed among these elder community members, the guild masters and council members who serve in leadership roles to their various guilds and have often been playing for a comparatively long time. These elders steer the direction of the guilds, and the guilds themselves are the building blocks of server politics. Their actions reverberate through the weak ties connecting them. As with The Rapture, one member's possible misconduct can have big consequences simply because the information travels quickly through the loose web of acquaintances the server holds until a simple conflict between two people results in instability at the top of the server's leading caste.

The participants felt that guilds themselves changed dramatically due to political pressure, and the servers themselves often have a direction of their own formed by the dominant guilds' attitudes. Returning to the "mature" vs. "young" server idea, one can see that many participants aligned the goals of a server with the majority of its guilds' goals. Since the results of these interviews suggest that progression-oriented guilds are more aggressive and militaristic in their approach to social life, younger servers could also be considered more volatile. Furthermore, according to all of the participants, WoW-related forums served to help players negotiate the larger terrain of the meta-game surrounding WoW--a public space in which to engage in rational discussion across severs, aided by the flow and use of information. All of the participants had changed guilds more than once, and all of the changes had been due to shifts in informed politics either inside or outside the guild.

And so, public communication lends itself to both social change and social control and cohesiveness. Powerful guilds and mature players maintain some authority to police the
boundaries of the game’s norms and “public sphere” but this sphere is open enough to allow for real structural social change as well. There appears to be a constant change both within guilds and within the server itself but ultimately there is also stability. Public information, transmitted through weak ties and facilitated by forums and other forms of community media helps to maintain meanings, thus keeping the larger social system of the culture of the game by identifying deviance, thus promoting change within boundaries often set by entrenched norms.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to explore public information sources in the virtual, online community of World of Warcraft and how these sources, in concordance with social ties, affect guild formation and dissolution. In addition to results about public information use in virtual communities, the study is also important simply because virtual communities are growing, both as social tools, business tools and perhaps most impressively, as the phenomenon of videogames. Understanding how information is used and how, in conjunction with weak-tie theory, it can spark social change may be useful in understanding the fast-growing gaming community and their information and social habits. Nearly all American teens—97%—ages 12-17 play computer, web, console, or mobile games. Teens are also playing these games with relative frequency and duration. One-third (31%) of teen gamers play games every day, and another one in five (21%) play games three to five days a week (Pew Internet, 2009). Furthermore, 53% of all American adults play video games on various platforms ranging from computers to cell phones (Pew Internet, 2009). Understanding public space within these games,
and how the public applies to them, is important since gaming in virtual environments is becoming nearly unanimous among American teenagers.

These results are also important for news organizations or any organization in the business of information because they may help to clarify that virtual environments act the same as real ones in many respects, except the hypermediacy of the virtual may inspire people to be more participatory in the act of information sharing. This was certainly the case in this study, which revealed that players within WoW are constantly engaging in a largely democratic process of generating and sharing information with their fellow players to both shore up meaning and norms within the game and also seek change, as well. In order to keep informed about their evolving world, players are active seekers and participators in the information process--namely, they are news junkies about their virtual communities. Some examples of news organizations forming within virtual worlds are, most notably, The Second Life Herald, a fully functioning virtual newspaper that solely covers events in Second Life and The Gadgetzan Times, a fictional newspaper covering the denizens of WoW. Also, large national news organizations such as CNN are beginning to develop virtual presences and integrate forums into their news process (Sanders, 2007). And so it seems increasingly evident that it is important for journalists to better understand the nature of news and information flow in online virtual environments.

Habermas points out there is a "collective self" or "autonomous public" inherent in communities, which resides on norms and a common understanding of said norms (1989). This public (or multiple publics) resides in a public sphere, or the boundaries and borders within which communication occurs. In WoW, there are two spaces within the boundaries in which meaning is negotiated-- the active, fluid world of gamespace and the reflexive, text-based metagame. Both spaces are different on multiple levels: the gamespace, which includes the virtual
world of Azeroth, is persistent and live, with players performing their social roles and ideologies in real time, and generating the events which later will be broken down and interpreted in the forum-based meta-game, which is essentially text-based CMC (computer-mediated communication). These interpretations and meanings facilitated by forums, blogs and other tools of the meta-game are then synthesized by the players and taken back into Azeroth, where they inform the common culture and norms of interacting in gamespace.

In a way, Azeroth provides the "lifeworld" that generates the societies, communities and boundaries of communication. Players generate meaning through play with each other and with the virtual landscape. However, this meaning is instantaneous. Players make real-time choices governed only by the parameters of the game itself. Communication is real-time, too, using the social tools in-game provided by Blizzard. Voice-chat is popular, as well, allowing the player to see their fellow players' avatars, see their actions, and hear their voices with no time constraints.

The meta-game, which involves the exchange of information through forums, is limited by time and by form. It is not live and it is text-based. For example, players usually experience down time before their post appears in the forum. Also, it is difficult for a player to participate in playing the game and engaging in the meta-game at the same time. In other words, players are either in the active gamespace or in the meta-game using the forums. Both are persistent, in that they continue to function whether a player is there or not, but the forums are reflexive, in that they "cover" the events that happen live during gameplay. The forums move more slowly in the sense that players tend to spend more time reading discussions and formulating reactions and responses to issues. When actively playing the game, it can be difficult to have a deep conversation with someone when one is being chased by a large monster. So, the forums lend themselves more to the dialogue sustaining the culture and communities of WoW. It is in the
forums within which a player or guild's actions are essentially analyzed by the community. It is also where information concerning the technical aspects of playing is found. Players participate in this public discussion, this creation and recreation of meaning based on in-game events, and they take the information with them back into the active gamespace of their realm, thus enacting the norms and meanings generated in the meta-game.

Furthermore, the tools provided by blizzard to active in-game communication and reflexive, text-based communication in the meta-game promote and encourage the exchange of information and ideas, thus supporting publics existing within WoW. The differences in how players use information denote that differences in play style exist, and with these differences come ideologies, sometimes at odds. Casual and serious gameplay styles are two that surfaced during this study.

Based on results, WoW does have a functioning public sphere with the means for the free and unhindered flow of discussion and decision-making in which players both help to create and navigate norms and common meanings. Also, the act of playing can be political, in that players often align themselves with specific ideologies which affect their choices in play and social interactions. These ideologies create fertile ground for discussion and conflict, and the conflict can not only change the direction of guilds and servers, but also shape the game as a whole. For instance, players in casual guilds still maintain social ties to the “real world,” or their lives outside of Azeroth. They often used guild chat to discuss jobs, life, family and personal issues rather than the game itself. This was untrue for serious guilds, whose guild chat channels were dedicated to discussion of the game or guild-related issues almost exclusively.

Over the course of the research, both the interviews of participants and observations offered substantial evidence of the centrality that forums play in the game. As noted above, they
lend themselves to more in-depth discussion of topics concerning events in game. However, different play styles often denote different concerns with accessing and using information – for example, casual guild leaders' reluctance to engage in their realm forum and their preference for the more anonymous forms of information exchange through third-party servers, which are not affiliated with Blizzard and often do not have options to discuss social occurrences in individual realms. The third-party forums typically deal more with technical information, and therefore are more geared towards creating norms and meaning when it comes to gameplay, or to be more specific, the technical aspects of playing the game. In a sense, these forums are the "trade journals" of WoW, or perhaps the large, "national newspapers" in that they cover the broadest aspects of the game and gameplay, allowing players to engage in trading information on how to equip and upgrade their avatars, strategies for raiding and ways to create wealth. Players who participate in them are often safe from any sort of external pressure and retain a sense of seclusion and anonymity while participating. These forums act as Matei, et al.'s (2001) macro-storytelling agent.

Blizzard provides realm servers, which serve only a small community of players located in a specific realm. The realm forums could be described as the "local news" and are concerned solely with occurrences within the realm-based population (or, perhaps more simply, the players who inhabit the realm). Here, there is no anonymity--the players who post in their respective realm forums are seen by, and interact with, the other posters on a day-to-day basis when playing the game. By examining the realm forums, it becomes apparent that the political and social implications of events within the server community are paramount here. It is in the realm forums where the leading guilds report their progress and where justice is meted out by the community to those found in fault or out of line with the established norms. It is also here where common
social knowledge is generated. Who is the best guild? Who are the best-geared players? Who are the most accomplished craftspeople? Who are the criminals? These are the concerns of the realm forums, which provide information on what affects the realm as a community of players, acting as Kim and Ball-Rokeach's (2001) meso-community storyteller.

The results of the study support the idea that there are public sources of information. Indeed, Blizzard actually provides tools for individuals to create their own social modifications to the game, and promotes third-party information sources where information can be exchanged freely. Blizzard itself provides forums so players can interact with the developers of the game and with their fellow community members on a variety of levels. In this way, the exchange of information is encouraged, and judging from the responses of the participants, this is necessary for playing the game effectively. There are larger, game-wide sources that serve the entire community of 11 million players, which deal in very general terms. There are also smaller outlets, which deal on a micro level with small groups of players. The most visible of these smaller outlets are the realm forums, but they can also include individual player's blogs and guild-only forums. These forums, both large and small in terms of the population and community they serve, act as the facilitator for meaning-making discussed by Lowrey, et al (2008). They do this by aiding meaning-making through “listening/pluralism,” or fostering diverse viewpoints, and through “leading/cohesiveness,” or helping to render these diverse viewpoints as an intelligible representation of the community to its members. In this light, the various forums found in the meta-game are very much a part of play and socialization in WoW and do serve as primary public sources of information both about the game and about those who play it.

How this information affects guild formation and dissolution is not clear-cut. While social and/or technical information does help guilds make decisions, participants were unclear as
to whether the information they gained from the forums influenced whether a guild survived or not. By examining realm forums and guild progression threads, there was some evidence that how guilds publicly represented themselves affected the realm community's view of them. In the case of the The Rapture, the negative reaction of the server community to their handling of accused theft correlated with their fall from the number-one spot on the server. However, it is difficult to say if it was the direct cause, since rank is not determined by popular choice, but by the ability to get through content and gain achievements. However, it is not a far stretch to say that a lack of new, willing and able recruits may not have been available to The Rapture after they lost clout in the public opinion arena.

The act of flaming guilds for perceived slights and weaknesses did influence smaller, casual guilds to avoid "sticking their neck out" by posting recruitment threads and progress on the realm forums. These concerns expressed by the leaders of small and casual guilds suggest that negative reactions to a guild from the forum community can lead to change within the guild that may or may not lead to instability.

When viewed in terms of strong and weak ties, and weak ties' correlation with social change, one can see why many small guilds that resist change do so by not participating in the conflict for rank and social position on the server. They essentially favor strong ties and social cohesion and eschew generating outside contact that may change the guild dynamics. One key example of this is that casual guilds tend to be casual because they understand that people have other lives. In this way, they maintain strong ties to the outside world and monitor weak ties within the game. Observation revealed that small, casual guilds have a different ways of speaking while chatting in game with each other. They bring in outside references and often call each other by real-life names as opposed to character names. This sharing of personal
information leads to a greater number of strong ties between players, since they feel they know each other as people, and not just as players.

One example was a guild called Lost Souls, which broke apart because many newer recruits had formed a "elite" group of raiders within the guild. When progression took priority over social cohesion with some players, the guild split and Lost Souls kicked everyone out, then went back and invited a select few members back, mainly those members that knew each other by name. They did this because they felt if should be a "guild of friends and family" and not a raiding competition. When change threatened, they responded with the gut instinct to remove the group that was seeking it in order to maintain a stable connection of people who felt they knew each other and were friends in real life as well as in game, even if they had never seen each other face to face.

By comparison, most serious guilds focus on chatting about the game, how to play it and how the guild can advance quicker and faster. Raiding schedules are often tight, and the people who raid more receive more rank, thus creating pressure to attend in order to get clout and gear. Serious raiders often eschew strong ties to the outside world to generate large networks in-game mainly centered on personal advancement. Turnover of players is often high in serious raiding guilds, mainly because serious raiders don't feel as if they need to stay if a guild is not moving fast enough for them. In other words, their friendship only extends to people and organizations that allow them to advance and essentially change their social status within the game. Because they move around so much, serious raiders often generate a large amount of weak ties with players on the server and seek to induce change, both individually and with a guild.

Weak ties primarily link members of different small groups while strong ties are evident within these small groups. Weak ties are what hold together large communities, often made of
many small groups, and provide the possibility for social change and innovation (Granovetter, 1973; 1983). Guilds that reach out to the server community, generating weak ties outside of the guild, essentially do so in order to invite change both on the server and within the guild. The larger, serious raiding guilds that post progression statistics do so in order to improve their standing on the server, thus seeking to upset the established status quo of who the "best" guilds are on the server. This status can open up new opportunities for a guild to gain recruits who are interested in progressing, thus bringing in new members and inviting change within the guild. Observations in-game did suggest that larger, more serious guilds had a higher turnover rate and were more likely to become unstable if they were unable to progress. These observations were supported by forum monitoring and interview results. A lack of progression becomes apparent on the realm forums and fewer players interested in progression are apt to fill out the ranks of a faltering serious guild, which may possibly result in a collapse.

The generating of weak ties outside of a guild can influence the direction that a guild takes. Also, guilds take certain directions based on their ideological orientations: smaller, casual guilds often favor strong ties and social cohesion over change, while serious guilds seek to change the server's social make-up through progression and the generation of weak ties, usually generated to increase their public presence on the server. A server community essentially acts as a web of contacts among guilds; if there are more serious guilds on a server than casual, then the server's social atmosphere will be different than in one that has a more casual approach and vice-versa.

The actions and orientations of these many guilds often determine the way a server views its self. Participants expressed ideas about how a server “feels” – whether it is new or old, progression-minded or casual. This "feeling" essentially boils down to the social atmosphere
within the server community itself. This atmosphere is directly related to the actions of the guilds on the server and how the server perceives itself. According to participants, a new server doesn't have a definite social hierarchy, and guilds tend to be finding their orientation and struggling to form and progress. New servers will either die or turn into older, more stable servers, or they may become what is known as a "dead" server. A stable server has a stable hierarchy with a relatively set group of guilds which form and maintain working relationships with each other either through competition or cooperation, depending on their orientation. In contrast, a dead server is one that fails to establish a working group of guilds, essentially causing players to leave for more active servers where there is a richer and more fulfilling social atmosphere.

By examining the differences between these types of server communities one can see that the development of ties between guilds, and the development of a normative status quo is essential for a server's survival. If a server's guilds cannot successfully generate a working social scene with a diverse quotient of guilds then it will wither. This social scene is largely created and sustained through the development of strong and weak ties within and between guilds. In order to function, a guild must keep its members linked together through the strength of ties while still fostering enough change to keep from stagnating. Most participants expressed that the survival of guilds is paramount to the survival of the server, and servers essentially are the building blocks of the WoW community as a whole. It is not a stretch to suggest that the health of the game community depends solely on the ability of players to form and maintain ties within the game, while also keeping a balance between change on the one hand, and the creation of agreed-upon norms and shared meaning on the other. In this way, the occurrences within WoW mirror social processes in real life, where communities also must weather the possibility of change while avoiding stagnation. While public media sources such as newspapers and television act as the
storytellers in a real-world community, the use of user-generated information mediated by forums is the primary information source of WoW; however, there appear to be similarities, as they both facilitate the spread of information, free discussion, and weak/strong ties within the community.

This study reveals that a functioning public sphere and its peripheral media components are essential to ensure the community health of WoW. It is reasonable to guess that this may also be the case in similar virtual communities, but future research would be needed to validate this. It also appears these healthy, functioning publics are sustained by the relative diversity of ties formed throughout the community – guilds must make choices as to how they will proceed in navigating the game both technically and socially. Guilds that favor social aspects versus technical aspects also resist change and choose to turn inward, focusing on fostering strong ties between guild members. Guilds that place value on power and progression in the game are often more focused on changing the hierarchy of the server by increasing their social presence; they are more likely to generate large amounts of weak ties and embrace change within the guild if that change aids in progression. The balance of these types of approaches and the types of ties they create determines the health of a server as a community and if the delicate balance between change and stability fails, then the server can "die," in the sense that players will leave to find a more fulfilling atmosphere.

In an effort to ensure validity, the researcher was immersed in the WoW community for an extended period of time and "lived" on a specific server for a year. However, the experiences of the researcher, the participants interviewed and the forum chosen are one small microcosm of the enormous community and culture surrounding WoW, and do not represent the entire player base. Nor do they entirely represent other virtual communities. However, there are similarities
running through all virtual communities, and especially within MMORPGs. By eschewing raw quantitative data for a naturalistic approach, the researcher attempted to shed light on the little-researched phenomenon of social change within MMORPGs. On a larger scale, the study can shed light on virtual communities as a whole in terms of public information and its use among leaders of different types of guilds or organizations. Further studies in this topic area would benefit from the use of representative samples to gain a better, bigger picture of how information and social ties affect virtual communities. Also, WoW and other MMORPGs are specific types of virtual communities, and while sharing some similarities with other virtual worlds such as Second Life, they also differ in that they force socialization and are highly goal-based. A player will find it very difficult to advance without reaching out and forming ties. In this respect, the process of forming ties and sharing information is synonymous with the parameters of gameplay and may not be indicative of how other, non goal-based virtual communities function.

As new technology enables the world-wide growth of virtual communities, it is important to look at how these communities both mirror real life and differ from it in order to gain understanding of a trend that is fast-growing and ultimately has the possibility to change the way humans communicate. Increasingly, organizations are turning to avatars, virtual worlds and interactive online communities to market products, share information and create their own community-based "meta-verses" around products and ideas. The use of sociological theory that is based in "real-life" interaction can be effective in analyzing trends in the social structures of virtual communities. However, they do not account for the idiosyncrasies of virtual communities, a few of which include anonymity, hypermediacy and virtuality. In this manner, they only serve to show us how virtual communities are similar or different in a way that judges virtuality on a "real-life" scale, which is often a poor measuring stick for such diverse and colorful worlds.
Future theoretical ventures may benefit from stepping away from the “virtual vs. real” binary and beginning to formulate theoretical approaches that embrace the uniqueness of the virtual frontier, both socially and metaphysically.
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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

How many hours a week would you say you are logged onto WoW?

How would you classify your guild: serious or casual?

How many guilds were you in before your current guild?

Why did you leave your former guilds, or, if the guilds dissolved, what were the reasons?

How easy do you find it is to move from guild to guild?

Do you feel that guilds are important to the game? If so, why? To what degree do you feel you can shape what happens in the guild? To what degree can guilds shape the meta-game?

Where do you go for information about the game? Process of playing or about succeeding in the game, etc.

Where do you go for information about your guild? And its activities, functions?

How do you use this information?

How well do you feel you know the members of your guild? How actively do you seek those who are not in your guild? How well do you know those not in your guild?

To what degree do you depend on others in your guild or on the guild itself? To what degree do you feel invested in guild processes, functions? And in what ways?

How do you and your guild mates communicate?

How often do you use the forums?

If you use the forums, what type of information do you seek out?

Do you feel that the forums are important to World of Warcraft? Why or why not?

Do you feel that the forums are important to you as a player? Why or why not?

Do you feel that the forums are important to your guild? Why or why not?
APPENDIX B

Social Tools in World of Warcraft

This is the social tab Blizzard provides for all players. This is my friends list, as you can see, it is pretty long as I have been playing for a while. I can see who is online and where they are. Right now it’s early in the morning, so none are online and these around me are other early birds.

The box below is the chat tab. Right now people are talking in the trade channel, which is for goods, services and general discussion. However, I also use this tab to talk to my guild or individual players.

Here is the mail system in WoW. On the left is my "Inbox/Outbox" and on the right is my inventory, with all of my possessions and gear.
APPENDIX C

The Auction House

This is the economic hub of the server's economy, the Auction House, where players can post goods they craft or get from killing things to sell to other players. Each server has a unique economy. As you can see, this item costs 5,907 gold so things can get expensive. Purple denotes a very rare, high level item that is often worth hundreds or thousands of gold.

I can scan for prices, look up items and bid or instantly buyout items I might need. In this way, it functions as an in-game eBay and is the primary means for exchanging goods and services.
APPENDIX D

The Character Tab