Imagine living in a place outside your own native country, and coming across an enclave of your native culture—the “ethnic neighborhood”—and browsing among familiar goods and services, seeing cultural symbols and religious icons, encountering news in your native language, and being able to pause at the local temple to give an offering to the deity. You meet other members of the diaspora, exchange stories, share information, and join communities. Religious and cultural identity is affirmed, reified. There is comfort in being able to move about the familiar landscape of such neighborhoods.

In the era of what we might call Web 2.0, computer-mediated communication allows for such experiences as described above to not only take place offline, but in the online or virtual world as well. Networks are now created through social media and a growing number of websites that target diaspora members act as portals to a multitude of other cultural sites, allowing a new transnationalism that was not possible a decade and a half ago. This essay will consider the formation of community in an online or virtual context, and the role of computer-mediated communication in facilitating these negotiations and encounters. The Hindu diaspora in the US, in particular, is one such religious/cultural portal. I will demonstrate how electronic pathways to various cultural sites are presented and accessed, as well as reveal close ties to Hindu nationalist sources. Such connections provide a contrast to the overall tone of the “neighborhood” as presented online.

(Virtual) Community

Some of the earliest scholarship on community (especially in regard to the “nation”) comes from Ferdinand Tönnies’ Gemeinschaft und Gessellschaft (Community and Civil Society), written in 1887 and considered to be a seminal text for theories of community and civil society. One of the distinguishing characteristics for Tönnies in choosing to analyze Verbindung (translatable as union, fraternity, association, connection, alliance, etc.) is that his investigation concentrates on relationships that are based on *positive mutual affirmation*. That is to say, that there is recognition between members of the community and an acceptance of the fellow member as part of the community—this is a transaction which does not, it should be noted, require face to face contact. Nationalism is exemplary of this transaction, where members of country share a feeling of commonality and community despite the fact that they will never meet—or even know the names of—most of the other members of that community.

Tönnies’ idea of positive mutual affirmation is perhaps the earliest forerunner to what would become “imagined communities” as conceived by Benedict Anderson in the late 20th century. Anderson’s definition of the nation as presented in *Imagined Communities* holds three conditions: 1) it is limited, in that it has finite

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1 The first epoch of the Web is generally understood to be 1995-2001. The second epoch, or Web 2.0, is marked by the advent of social media, increased accessibility, and the rise of the smartphone.

2 Ferdinand Tönnies. *Community and Civil Society.* Translated by Jose Harris and Margaret Hollis (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 17.
boundaries which, although flexible and permeable, are well defined when they run into the “other” nations, 2) it is sovereign in that it is free from God, or not subject to a divinely-ordained, dynastic hierarchy, and 3) it is a community, in that it “is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.” In other words, the imagined community of Anderson’s theories is a real alliance perceived between members who may never actually meet face-to-face, but are bound by common “culture” in a horizontal fraternity. Both Anderson and Tönnies also point out that group bonding and formation is strongest when responding to external threat or conflict, that definitions and boundaries become crystalized when coming in contact with the “other.” Anderson’s discussion is broader than that of just nationalism, however, conflating the “nation” with “community” in general. For this reason his theories of “imagined community” have been successfully applied to other studies of social groups, such as gender identities and in discussions of globalization.

To discuss community formation on the Internet, one has to move away from face-to-face interactions and think of community truly in the Andersonian sense. It has been argued that community is best seen as a network rather than as a local group. Most of the social support, the information, and the resources that people require to function in their everyday lives come from sources outside of their own local setting. Therefore the idea of community need not be seen as a solid block of people within arm’s length of each other, but rather as diffuse but connected. As social entities, communities bear two elements: On one hand, they are “a web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another.” On the other hand, they exhibit a level of commitment to “a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity—in short, a particular culture.” The concept of a “web” or network of people who are connected across space and time is particularly salient with regard to the conceptualization of the World Wide Web.

Thinking about community as networks allows us to consider further the formation of such networks in online vs. offline spaces. In other words, networks can be analyzed through their formation, content, connectivity, and personalization for further insights into the communities they represent. The medium of computer-mediated communication (CMC) eliminates many of the material challenges that make “real world” community, in terms of companionship and a sense of belonging, so difficult to fulfill; in fact, such communal resources are easy to find on the Internet.” Indeed, as Darin Barney suggests, “spatial personal networks comprised of ties of varying degrees of intimacy and activity provide the very communal resources and experiences that local neighborhoods do not: support, sociability, information, and a sense of belonging.”

It would not seem a great leap, therefore, to talk about “virtual communities.” The term “virtual” has been defined variously and thus may seem problematic in its application to community—I have, however, reasons for using the term “virtual” instead of simply relying on the term “online.” “Virtual community” is a concept which is often presented as something new, arriving with the advent of Internet and

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7 Ibid., 37.
technology and the proliferation of the Web. However, the virtual community has always existed, albeit in different forms; in this sense it is consonant with Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community.” Examples of this would include transnational communities and diaspora communities. It may be more useful, therefore, to not regard the virtual community exclusively as online community, or as a new feature of network formation, but instead consider the Internet as a new medium for discourse which enables new networks and identities to form.

While there is an empirical difference between an online community and an offline community (the most obvious being the space in which the community connections are forged), it is my intention to argue “virtual” and “real” are a false binary with an implied value statement. While we can align virtual/online and real/offline, my use of virtual also encompasses communities and rituals that go beyond the simple delineations of digital space. I gloss “virtual” beyond the idea of “online”: for instance, just as virtual community is not only online community, virtual ritual is not only e-ritual or online ritual. We can look at online religious practice as an example: the Hindu website EPrarthana.com offers two kinds of “virtual puja” (a prototypical Hindu ritual of honoring the deity). One can go to a webpage that presents an image of the deity, and through animation and mouse clicks, one can make offerings and light incense. This is a virtual/online ritual. However, the other option from this site is to select an actual temple in India from their list and, after specifying deity, prayer concerns, and other details, a representative of EPrarthana will act as proxy to offer pūjā on the buyer’s behalf at that location. This could be argued to be a virtual/offline ritual in that a real body substitute is completing a religious transaction on one’s behalf, with the understanding that any benefit of the ritual is being conferred to the buyer, not the performer.8

Similarly, “virtual sacred space” does not have to exclusively refer to digital space; it can also refer to a virtual or representational space in “real world” geography, which acts as a substitute for the actual location. Heinz Scheifinger argues that the concept of replication, or representation in virtual form, is a feature of Hinduism already as temples, rivers and towns can all be replicated.9 He gives the example of the Kedārnath mandir (temple) in the Himalayas, which is replicated in the pilgrimage center in Varanasi, allowing pilgrims to perform their pilgrimage without ever leaving the city.10 Conversely, Varanasi itself is replicated in Uttarkashi, and Varanasi’s famous Viśvanāth mandir—one of the most important temples in Hinduism and the prime mandir to Shiva—is replicated in two south Indian towns; to worship at those mandirs supposedly confers the same benefits as performing worship in Varanasi. Thus, using an expanded notion of the virtual, these can be seen as examples of virtual mandirs, in that they are replicating other spaces, symbolically representing a distant, sacred local for the purpose of allowing the worshipper remote access—much as one does on the Web. It should be noted that these examples exhibit a specificity of location; the “virtual” or proxy site is homologous to that which it represents. This is quite different than a claim that there is an ontological interconnectedness to everything, which would also facilitate such virtual transactions. As examples such as these

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8 According to Similar Web, 56.82% of Eprarthana.com’s traffic is from India and 21.28% is coming from the US (over a six month period of Jan–June 2015). There is no way to tell if individual users accessing the site are Hindus practicing an online ritual, or if they are non-Hindus exploring alternate spiritualities (or are doing research, as I am). My goal is not to assess the percentage of ‘authentic’ users of such sites, but rather to demonstrate that these sites are indeed being used by many Hindus both inside and outside of India as a viable alternative to offline/‘real world’ practices.


10 Also see Diana L. Eck. Banaras: City of light (Columbia University Press, 1983).
demonstrate, “virtual” is a term which can easily be extended beyond simply “online,” and my use of it will contain these nuances.

With these considerations, we can see how Anderson’s “imagined communities” can be taken beyond nationalism into other communities such as online communities, transnational communities, and diaspora communities. The term ‘transnationalism’ was coined by Randolf Bourne to describe the interconnectivity of cultures—whether across global spaces or within a single nation. Considered to be a product of globalization, transnationalism speaks to a common identification with a remembered country or idealized culture to which members of a community identify as belonging—very much Anderson’s idea of ‘imagined community’. As communities are conceptually constructed through shared norms, values, culture, and fraternity as imagined between members of those communities (and that these relationships do not require face-to-face contact or geographical proximity), diaspora and transnational communities are exemplary models of the modern “virtual community” which is fostered by CMC and other technologies.

Diaspora as a virtual community
To understand the meaning of community, we also need to consider how space is used in reference to the online world as well as its role in transnationalism. The Internet exhibits a dislocation of time and space (or, simultaneously, a compression of time and space) which is why it is such an effective vehicle for the globalization process. The Internet is rife with spatial and movement metaphors: cyberspace, web sites, logging in/out, getting on the Web, being in a chatroom, going to a website, jumping, surfing, following—even the ‘information super-highway’ suggests a high speed multi-lane road. Digital technologies conceive themselves as space-based, but at the same time we have noted that they compress space (and time), dislocating our experience. Nowhere is this more relevant, perhaps, than in connection to diaspora studies.

Virtual community takes on very real-world application when discussing diaspora. With the exception of dense urban centers which host enclave communities such as a “Little India” or “Chinatown”—often formed in cities like New York, Chicago, or San Francisco when early immigrants set up neighborhoods with shared language and business—most immigrants are more scattered across the Western hemisphere. As Ananda Mitra has pointed out, this “has produced an increasing need for alternative means of community formation” and “one of the many ways such groups are being formed is with the use of electronic communication systems.” Mitra argues that computer-mediated communication technologies are used to recreate a sense of virtual community through rediscovered commonality—that is, a perception of shared culture.

The Hindu diaspora is an example of just such an imagined community. It can be said that Hindus in the US are “doubly marked” by the remembrance of India and the deferred


12 It is worth pointing out that Indian diaspora has been theorized as two different movements. The first, starting as a British imperial movement to bring labor to the colonies, is considered a classic-capitalist model. The second movement is the mid to late 20th century diasporas into metropolitan centers of the Empire and the New World. Our discussion is concerned with the latter.

promises of the imagined America. Although it is a well-tread area of scholarship, it is worth mentioning that “Hindu” is in itself an unstable category. The construction of “Hindu” as a religious designation has been thoroughly problematized by scholars such as Fitzgerald (1990), Pennington (2005), and Lorenzen (2006), who consider the category as a colonial appellation attempting to fit in with Western models of religion. Subsequently, the “regulatory fictions” of census categories such as Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian are identities that were reified by the administration of the British Raj are still resonant in the imagination of self-identity of South Asians living in the US. As Amit Rai argues, the collection and production of quantitative values and measurement of phenomena, groups, and facts produced a knowledge that was 1) ahistorical in that it was used to deny the constitution of subjects in a locatable time and place, with a determinate history, and 2) normative hegemonic in its use of comparison between groups within a single population, resulting in a number of fantasy populations in which each person has one clear place in society.

This produces tensions for Hindu diaspora populations in the US in two interesting ways.

The first way relates to Benedict Anderson’s discussion of simultaneity of two identities within a singular imaginary: 1) “time” of the nation is eternal and has always been, a promise to be fulfilled in the future and representing an unbroken line of historical narrative, and 2) a “homogenous empty time” in which simultaneity is “marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar.” Anderson is drawing heavily from Walter Benjamin’s concept of Messianic time, in which there is simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present. In this sense, it could be argued that diasporic communities collectively negotiate the intrinsic qualities of how they imagine their eternal past, and the modern temporal qualities of the promised future. Materializing a perpetual present, cyberspace offers the ideal public space for a people without a history or, in this sense, for people of a diaspora.

The second tension relates back to the production of knowledge as it relates to identity. In the case of non-resident Indians (NRIs), there is a “break” with the past—either in leaving India, through the experience of Partition, or another displacement related to ethnic or economic priorities—even though the history of India resonates through the concept of Hindu identity due to its narrative of ancient civilizations and pervasive nationalism which consistently attempt to tie “Hindu” to “Indian.” From this history, the categorization of religio-cultural categories arose under the

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15 While van der Veer (2001) and Frykenberg (1993) clearly identify a recognizable Hindu tradition during the early Mughal period (~1500 CE), the general consensus among religious studies scholars is that ‘Hinduism’ is an unstable taxonomic category which is, at best, an umbrella term. As Timothy Fitzgerald notes, the nature of Hinduism itself as a complex and diverse collection of traditions requires a broadly sociological approach to make it intelligible to Western students, but such an approach is less likely to lead to a fictional construction of Hinduism than when relying on a more theological or comparative approach (1990, 101).

16 Rai, 33.

17 Ibid., 34.
Raj, and these categories are imported as Indians migrate to the West. Simultaneously, there is an urge to “belong” to the new society, to transcend the status of “immigrant” to “citizen,” and proudly identify with the host country. In a way, it is a balancing act of the Gandhian view of separate-but-equal communities, each of whom would retain their group identity but coexist peacefully, and the Nehruvian view which rejects communalism in favor of a secular hegemony where religious identity is irrelevant and secularism is the rule of the nation. Sometimes called the “pluralistic” versus the “atheistic” view of secularism in India, it nonetheless reveals the tensions between identifying as an American Sikh or American Hindu (drawing from the imperial delineations) and identifying as American NRI or American desi.

For these reasons, the term “diaspora” has been problematized in South Asian studies, and thus frequently reduced to a simplification which describes any immigrant community or racial minority group living in countries other than their native origin. To define this term a bit more, Steven Vertovec argues that “diaspora” has three nuances. The term’s most common application is diaspora as a social form, referring originally to the Jews’ traumatic exile from the homeland. For this reason, the word took on a negative connotation, being associated with forced displacement, loss, and alienation. Thus the social aspects of diaspora may include: the process of becoming scattered, living as a community in foreign lands, the maintenance of collective identity, the idea of a shared experience or “ethnic myth” of common origin, and the maintenance of ties with the homeland. Vertovec notes that most work done on South Asian communities relates diaspora to this social form.

The second application of diaspora is as a type of consciousness, or awareness of multilocality. This approach puts greater emphasis on the description of experiences, states of mind, and a sense of identity. What is often described as “diaspora consciousness” refers to a particular kind of awareness generated by transnational communities and is marked by a dual or paradoxical nature which is constituted negatively by discrimination or exclusion, and positively through the identification with historical heritage (such as “Indian civilization”) or by contemporary global, cultural, or political forces (such as “Islam”). This is directly related to W.E.B. DuBois’ concept of ‘double consciousness’, which again relates to our previous discussion of simultaneity—of past and future experienced in the present, and of the simultaneous cognizance of memory and promise.

Lastly, the approach to diaspora as a mode of cultural production is related to globalization, and “the world-wide flow of cultural objects, images and meanings resulting in variegated process of creolisation, back-and-forward migration, and the transformative impact of mass media and information technology upon national identities.”

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23 Ibid., 278.

24 Ibid., 278-279.

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25 It could be argued that a sense of liminality is intrinsic to this form. Famed folklorist Arnold van Genep (1960) was known for his distinction of the phases or “rites of passage” in all societies. Briefly, these are: 1) separation or detachment from the group, 2) transition, socially ambiguous, or liminal state, and 3) re-incorporation into the community. From these three phases, later anthropologists frequently drew upon the second state, the marginal or liminal. Victor Turner (1969) in particular took this up, arguing that “liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.” For this reason, it is worth noting that diasporic communities have been discussed in terms of liminality, as well as by hybridity. Electronic space—arguably a liminal space “being neither here nor there”—is often the only common space diasporic groups can simultaneously occupy.

26 Vertovec, 281.

27 Ibid.
forth transferences, mutual influences, new contestations, negotiations and constant transformations.”

In this approach, identity is fluidly constructed, produced, and reproduced to create categories of ‘ethnicity’. Vertovec notes that the primary channel for this flow of cultural experience and transformation of diasporic identity is global media and communications. “Complex transnational flows of media images and messages perhaps create the greatest disjunctures for diasporic populations, since in the electronic media in particular, the politics of desire and imagination are always in contest with the politics of heritage and nostalgia.”

I am interested in this third definition of diaspora, especially the cultural and religious production that occurs through new media. On one hand, when looking at immigrant communities, one can observe that certain spaces and events—such as temples, community centers, holiday festivals, and political rallies—offer opportunities for “cultural re-grouping.” That is to say, even when born and raised outside of one’s homeland or native country, “diasporic identity,” “native culture,” “authenticity,” or “ethnicity” can be encountered and even forged in such arenas. These elements can be socially constructed through discursive processes and semiotics, and cultural regrouping occurs at the site for such production. Yet at the same time, the production of culture—especially in the sense of maintaining an identifiable, “authentic” Hind-uism—is a project that is attentively performed by Hindu nationalist organizations in India. Keenly aware of role Hindus abroad play in financial and political influence in the homeland, Hindu nationalist organizations contribute to the production of Hindu religion and culture in new media to support their own agendas for homogeneity in India. The Hindu diaspora (especially as it is formed in the UK and North America) plays an important role in maintaining the idea of a “Hindu nation” both financially and ideologically.

CMC as community building in diaspora

For a diasporic individual, for whom home is no longer a concrete geographical place, online space presents itself as an ideal site for the recovery of and connection with other members of the diasporic community with whom they explore or imagine a cultural kinship. This is what I term cultural regrouping. Cultural regrouping refers to the phenomenon that occurs when an immigrant or diasporic individual enters a location, setting, or community gathering which invokes the native or homeland in effort to remind one of their original, authentic, or native cultural identity and where one can be among other community members who share that identity. The most common form of this regrouping is found in the local synagogue, the temple, the gurdwara, or the mosque; these are all places in which one is reminded of one’s history—a history that is generally tied to a national, cultural, and ethnic narrative—and where one can be among other community members who share that identity. The role of religion is central to ethnic construction in immigrant contexts because it often serves as an agent for the transmission of culture as well as providing the institutional framework for community formation. In other words, one “regroups” with the traditions, practices, and community, which in turn foster ties to the homeland and to one’s culture. The process of regrouping suggests an attempt to

28 Ibid., 289.
29 Ibid., 290.

forge continuity with the past, a personal narrative which reifies a religious and cultural identity that is tied to a geography and history no longer physically occupied.

Online space may also provide communities with opportunities for “regrouping.” That is to say, diasporic communities are sometimes forced to rely less upon proximity in creating “Little Indias” or other ethnic neighborhoods, and more upon community formation based on commonalities which can be identified and shared through CMC. As a result we find that electronic or virtual communities are more common as technology progresses. Anderson’s “long-distance nationalism” is precisely an example of such alliances forming across great distances.

To consider Hindu transnationalism, there must be a conception of Hindu community that acts as a reference point to which members of the diaspora orient themselves. This idea of community is seated deeply in the rhetoric of Hindu nationalism, as well as colonial histories. The project to establish or delineate a “Hindu community”—one that would be recognizable both from the interior through mutual recognition by its members, and from the exterior—was actively undertaken first by the British Raj in order to exercise administrative power over the native population, and then by Hindu nationalists in response to colonialism in order to establish an independent India that is marked by Hindu identity. This process occurred through various forms of media, including print, and continues in the electronic public sphere in effort to maintain an idea of “Hindu community” in the light of globalization and transnationalism. To maintain this idea in the United States, computer-mediated communication provides the diaspora community ways of maintaining religious and cultural connections to the homeland.

The definition of diaspora as a mode of cultural production involves the production and reproduction of transnational, social, and cultural phenomena. “Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.” It is closely related to the process of globalization; Anthony Giddens describes the process as a tearing away of space from place, through the fostering of relations between “absent others” which are distant from another location’s face-to-face interaction. “In conditions of modernity, place becomes increasingly phantasmagoric.” The Internet and CMC technology have transformed the complex relationships between the local and the global, thereby becoming integral to the globalization process. Thanks to the processes of cultural globalization, diasporas are able to create and maintain meaningful networks across great distances, whether bound by nation, language, ethnicity, religion, ideology, or histories. Yet, how diasporas are maintained and experienced are deeply dependent on the ability to access and use these technologies.

Statistics reveal the status of Indians in the US as relatively better than other minorities. Looking the entire American population, the median household income including all sectors of the US is $52,762 per year, 28.2% has a bachelor’s degree or higher, 36% are employed in professional or managerial jobs. Asian Americans in general have higher numbers compared to other ethnic groups, but Indians top the numbers among immigrant communities: 73% have a bachelor’s degree or higher, 66.3% are employed in professional or

33 Stuart Hall. “Cultural identity and diaspora.”
34 Giddens, 18-19.
managerial jobs (27% in Information Technologies), and have a median household income of $83,000.\textsuperscript{37} Therefore, the ‘digital divides’ that exist in the Indian homeland (that is, discrepancies of Internet access between rural/urban, rich/poor, educated/uneeducated) are far less an issue in the American Hindu communities. As 81% of people living in the US have access to the Internet and Indian-Americans typically occupy middle- and upper-class economic tiers, cultural regrouping online is a viable and likely option for Hindus in the US.

**Virtual Hindu community: E-thnic neighborhood**

Computer-mediated communication offers opportunities for fostering transnational connections and cultural regrouping. As a community that is also able access technology more consistently than Indians back home, Hindus in the US also have the opportunity to encounter others in the immigrant or diaspora community through CMC or through portals which act as *virtual ethnic neighborhoods*. It is in this way we can begin to think about the spatial dimensions of transnational communities online as exemplary of globalization. This section will take a look at one popular web portal which allows for opportunities of cultural regrouping online.

The relationship between the temple and the community is central to the regrouping process. For diaspora communities, the temple is one of the hubs for “cultural regrouping” and is a significant part of community formation among immigrant communities.\textsuperscript{38} Instances of cultural regrouping, however, can also happen outside the religious institutions. A good example of this is found in campus student organizations, such as the South Asian Students’ Association or Hindu Students’ Council. Another example, as I have stated, are the local enclaves or ethnic neighborhoods where the businesses reflect the food, clothing and material goods of that ethnic community (as well as language), which not only buffer the effects of an alien culture to a newly-arrived immigrant, but enable members to retain ties throughout the community. Regrouping also happens in camps or schools which teach in native languages. Holiday festivals in particular are a very public demonstration of regrouping; often open and inviting to non-community members, it provides a way to both share culture with outsiders and to proudly demonstrate its traditions or visual symbols through affirmation of the ethnic community.

I argue that regrouping can also occur online, often mirroring the sites and relationships of the offline encounters. This can be seen in interactive spaces such as chatrooms or forums. As early as 1995, Amit Rai examined how the Hindu diaspora were utilizing electronic bulletin boards to construct and contest identities. Looking at electronic bulletin boards such as JANET in the UK, ARPANET in the US, and BITNET which linked universities and research centers around the world, Rai noted that the “construction of religious or communal identities in India can also be seen as the emergence of a conflictual set of discourses positioned against that other master narrative of modern India: secularism.”\textsuperscript{39}

In other words, ideas about national or religious identity were negotiated through the plurality of voices on the role of religion in the public sphere—a plurality which generated a conflict of opinion, which in itself created alternate


\textsuperscript{39} Rai, 34.
discourses (in this case, the definition of secularism in India) to be debated.

In addition to forums and chatrooms, websites also provide a network for regrouping. NRIs maintain websites “for the purposes of cultural preservation and the maintenance of ethnic identity, and to support cosmopolitan, intercontinental lifestyles and consumption habits.” From these sites, one can follow a number of hyperlinks to sites in India: online versions of Indian newspapers, business sites, cultural sites, temples, and so forth. As a result, the access of online versions of news and culture in India is proportionally higher among overseas Indians because the Web is often the only means of access such items from India.

Hyperlinks play an important role, facilitating movement between online spaces and allowing the user to explore culturally similar websites. Some of the sites designed for both resident and non-resident Indians include: hindulinks.org, indiatimes.com (news), sify.com (news), namaste.com (history and photographs), indiaplaza.com (shopping network), netip.org (network of Indian professionals), indianmasala.com (desi entertainment portal), b4utv.com (Bollywood), indnet.org (for NRIs researching India), and the popular social media site Orkut which was operated by Google through 2013. While not as popular in the US as Facebook, Orkut had at its peak over 33 million active members worldwide, drawing largely from the under-30 crowd, and mostly from Brazil, India, and US.

Material culture in general—such as traditional clothing items, jewelry, food items, music, videos, and books—supports the continuation and preservation of traditional constructions of community, personal identity, and embodiment. Online availability to such items, via shopping sites such as utsavfashion.com or indiaplaza.com, thereby slows or negotiates the assimilation process. Prominent websites like hindu.org and hindunet.org are two of the most popular specialized sites in assisting NRIs with the preservation of cultural knowledge and spiritual practices.

One of the top ranked Hindu sites (and therefore likely to be on the front page for anyone who searches “Hindu”), the Hindu Universe (www.hindunet.org) poses as a repository for Hindu culture: HinduNet is the conglomerate of the most prominent internet destinations for a billion Hindus around the world and those who seek to learn about Hindu dharma (Hinduism). It is a lifestyle destination for this life and beyond! HinduNet seeks to serve Hindus and those interested in Hindu Dharma (Hinduism) by creating internet destinations that provide spiritual, cultural, social networking, educational, communication, current event, healthcare resources.

As the blurb from the website boasts, Hindu Universe is a “lifestyle destination” and seeks to serve Hindus by connecting users to sites that provide a variety of resources. Claiming to have over 29,000 links, the website is created and maintained by a group called Dharma Universe LLC, who sponsors a dozen websites. It also has a Facebook page, mostly used to promote its new Hindunet Magazine (online ‘flipboard’

41 Ibid., 429.
43 The Dharma Universe LLC group own the following domains: www.archaka.org/ (Puja); hindunet.org/ (The Hindu Universe); www.hinduweb.org (Hindu Web Universe: free Hindu web pages and services); www.gitatoday.org/press_release/ (Gita Today); www.hindukids.org (Hindu Kids Universe: interactive learning site; www.hindubooks.org/introduction/ (Hindu Books Universe); bhojan.org/dynamic/ (Bhojan – Resources for Vegetarians); www.free-india.org (Free India – culture, history, etc.); www.hinduyouth.com (Hindu Youth Universe); www.hindulinks.org (Hindu Links Universe); www.hvk.org (Hindu Vivek Kendra – resource center for promotion of Hindutva)

and flash magazine which collects stories and pictures from all over the Web.  

Aside from being one of the top ranked Hindu sites on the Web, Hindu Universe has estimated web traffic of 89,000 hits per month. 86.2% of its users find it using a search engine, with 50.42% accessing it from India, and 29.65% accessing the site from the US in the last three months. Keywords that brought desktop traffic to the site over the last three months include: Hindu calendar, Upanishads, Vedas, Rig Veda, and Hindu Gods (as the top five organic keywords). Almost all traffic via search engine was through Google. 

Visitors to the Hindu Universe site, according to data mining by Similar Web, also visited the following website categories (reflecting their general interest in or purpose for accessing hindunet.org): religion and spirituality, travel and tourism, career and education, and food/recipes (as the top four categories reported).

Functionally, the Hindu Universe website has a very basic layout offering the usual tabs across the top (services, forums, chat, calendar, activism, news, etc.) and then flanked by panels running down either side. The left panel has a list of “channels” that link to other pages, most of which are internal to the hindunet.org server site and are by that token not particularly graphically enticing, although they do offer a basic interface of hyperlinking to information and pictures. The channels include:

- Hindu Resources (links to other sites and resources, info about Jain, Sikh, Buddha and Hindu dharmas, news, calendar)
- Kids and Youth (basic info on praying posture and gestures, link to Hindu Kids Universe, an animated interactive page for learning stories like the Ramayana, prayer, about India, songs, and a shop)
- Women (information about goddesses, women-related news, issues and politics)
- Health and Life Style (info about yoga, vegetarianism, etc.)
- Marriage and Family (links to matrimonials/personal ad listings, baby names, information about the traditional Hindu marriage ceremony, dowry, and interfaith marriage)
- Pujas and Samskaras (info on pūjā, ārati, etc. with links to details on how to perform rituals in your home)
- Spiritual Tourism (links to a massive list of temples in India, along with regional pages featuring history and lore of most prominent temples for that area)
- Community (link to a seva organizations, American Hindus Against Defamation, and calls for donations to Gujarat earthquake victims, and other links)
- India (tourism and travel, comprehensive directory of India sites with hundreds of potential links, link to the Organiser and Panchjanya news magazines, along with links to historical information including Ekmata Stotra lyrics, and ‘the myth of Aryan invasion of India’)

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44 flipboard.com/section/hindunet-magazine-bwoWxD

45 Hindunet.org is consistently among the top five sites suggested for “Hinduism” by search engines such as Google: www.topsite.com/best/hinduism. Accessed October 2014.


47 A competing company, Alexa, has disputed the accuracy of Similar Web’s data, so I will provide Alexa’s data here as well which reports that 84.8% of the visitors to hindunet.org are from India, and 10.3% from the US. They report, however, that 30.1% of the traffic comes to them through search engines, which seems low (but would otherwise suggest that their traffic was largely ‘regulars’). Accessed November 2014, www.alexa.com/siteinfo/hindunet.org.
• Hindu Shops (link to HinduShops.com which offers books, music, etc., Hotwire.com for cheap airfares, and Hindu classifieds)
• Multimedia (dharsan art gallery, digiprayers; you can select a deity, and see a few animated images of them, usually depicting a famous scene from their mythology)

Already, one can identify a textual replication of an ethnic neighborhood in an online domain. Shopping, music, food, health, and other sundry needs can be met through the hyperlinks. It is important to point out that the mere arrangement and classification of the categories and channels (hyperlinked) in itself reflects post-colonial/Western influence. Even in this domain of Hindu portals, it creates categories of digital space that are defined by Western paradigms.

There is a multitude of ways to explore any number of religious expressions through the hyperlinks provided. Hindu Universe Resource Center linked to websites about: religious music, arts, temples, gods/sages/gurus, philosophy, scripture, worship, customs, books and resources, interfaith relations, history, and social issues to name a partial list. The multimedia link offers digital prayers, hyperlinking to a page for virtual ritual practice—“Do Digi Prayers to various Gods and Goddesses even when you are at work, home or from anywhere.” This allows one to practice the prototypical ritual of pūjā, during which the deity is believed to be present in the image (either two or three dimensional) and the devotee can honor the deity through offerings, prayer, and music. The transaction of darṣan, or “seeing and being seen by the deity,” is also part of this ritual and thus is understood to be possible even with an electronic image. One can select from nine popular deities

and be directed to another page which, with a click of the mouse, provides an image of the deity, music, and ability to offer flowers and a coconut. As early as 1998 this site offered simple darṣan of electronic images (without audio or animation), possibly two years prior to Eprarthana.com’s virtual pūjā which is earliest spotted in 2000.

As for news about India, it is no accident that the Organiser and Panchjanya are hyperlinked. The Organiser is the in-house magazine of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and carries with it the right-wing nationalist party agenda. Panchjanya is a Hindi language news site that is distinctly pro-Hindutva (militant nationalist), and not unexpectedly, also a product of the RSS. Given the list of other websites Dharma Universe LLC owns (see footnote 40), this should not be a surprise—Hindu Vivek Kendra, for one, is very right-wing and nationalist.

Web analytics group Alexa reports that 1,070 sites link to hindunet.org, underscoring not only the efficacy of the hypertext in creating a networked ‘neighborhood’, but also brings up another worthwhile point to consider about

Figure 1
TouchGraph data map of most frequently trafficked connections between websites linked to/from Hindunet.org (March 2015).
closed loops of information—that is, which sites are linked to each other, and what we can learn about such connections. Using another tool called TouchGraph, we are able to visually map any website and its most well-traversed hyperlinks/connections. For example, entering hindunet.org into the program produces this simple map (figure 1).

From this simple visualization tool, we can identify many websites that a user might frequent through this portal. This includes the global Hindu nationalist organization Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), the popular periodical Hinduism Today, and Himalayan Academy (who incidentally publishes Hinduism Today). By double clicking on any one of the links, one can expand the map of connections ad infinitum. Adding the VHP, the following map emerges (figure 2).

We can now see traffic patterns forming through hyperlinks, notably through Hinduism Today magazine, Hindu Wisdom (a site with quotes from numerous Hindu religious texts), and the added connection of Hindu Janajagruti—another ultra-conservative Hindutva organization. Adding their website to the map, we see the following in figure 3 below.

These maps, which can continue endlessly, demonstrate how closed loops of information occur to shape a web user’s experience. As discussed in the book The Filter Bubble—which shockingly revealed that the Web was not a truly open, democratic information superhighway—algorithms used by search engines and hyperlinking between websites make it difficult to escape informational cul-de-sacs. While this is useful not only for the member of a diaspora community who may wish to spend their time online exploring sites that are specifically relevant to their own culture and experience, at the same time there is a limiting of information—in this case, a pervasive influence of Hindu nationalist sites—which has the potential to influence the formation of transnational communities and personal identity formation.

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48 The “filter bubble” refers to these closed loops of information that severely limit our online experiences. This destroys the mythological conception that the Internet is a limitless source of information where all voices are heard—the idealized Habermasian public sphere. Rather, the electronic public sphere is a collection of well-worn paths that are pre-selected for us based on our browsing, social media, personal preferences, and dozens of other criteria which are collated and analyzed to direct our every move on the Web. See Eli Pariser. The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you (Penguin UK, 2011).

49 This suggests an interesting paradox in which the potentiality of the public sphere is expanding because of sheer volume and technological advances, yet simultaneously becoming increasingly individualized.
I raise this issue in the broader context of studying religion online because I’ve found no scholarship that addresses it. The point that I wish to make, particularly in the scope of looking at competing presentations of Hinduism or Hindu culture, is that the public sphere in which we operate—both as consumers and producers—is limited by the very medium we approach as the unlimited doorway to information. Whether the Internet revolutionizes the public sphere or makes it more fragmentary should be revisited in light of this new technology.

In regards to Hinduism online—how it is presented, promoted, managed, ossified, homogenized—the filter bubble works much like a popularity contest. From that first page of search results from Google, to hyperlinks on the user’s favorite websites, sites clicked on the most continue to remain at the center of the user’s view. A simple exercise that demonstrates the dangers of such simplification (of any religious tradition) is to search Google Images for “Hinduism” and for “Islam.” The former category will yield a colorful assortment of rosy-cheeked deities, women in saris, Holi festivals, OM symbols, and yoga positions. The latter will have a shocking amount of women in niqab, angry radicals burning American flags or effigies, dark colors, and frowning Imams. Nuance is hard to find on the Web; it is a domain of headlines, sound bites, and symbols. A question that could be asked is whether such images (representing broader ideas and concepts) are Westernized, Orientalized, or “authentic”—and who has the authority to decide? If efforts to seek out Hindu religious traditions are encumbered both by search algorithms and a very conscious effort to present a particular “version” of Hinduism to the world—and Hindu nationalist organizations claim authority in confirming what is “authentic”—then there are important questions as to how this may shape diasporic identities for those who rely more on the “virtual” communities for regrouping than on local community.

Figure 3
TouchGraph data map of most frequently trafficked connections between Hindunet.org, VHP.org, and Hindu Janajagruti (March 2015).
Conclusion
Diaspora or transnational communities exemplify Benedict Anderson’s conception of the “imagined community” in that they rely on the mutual recognition of members as sharing some sort of experience and culture, but transcend geographical proximities. The advent of computer-mediated communication has greatly facilitated the transnational experience, not only with social media and chat forums, but by providing a virtual landscape in which one can interact with one’s native culture. Such opportunities, thanks to hyperlinking, begin to take the shape of virtual ethnic neighborhoods in which the web user can find familiar symbols, language, and products of a particular religion/culture. Venues for online religious practice (such as e-pūjā or e-darśan) as well as electronic sources for religious texts and discussion, further the ability for diaspora members to “regroup” in online spaces.

The online regrouping experience, however, may be encumbered by the nature of the medium. Mechanisms such as algorithms and “filter bubbles” limit or direct users to websites with more inter-connective traffic, possibly giving a narrower view of a particular culture or religion. There is also the issue of accessibility, thus digital divides factor into consideration in regards to both economic tier an immigrant group occupies and the Internet saturation of the diaspora’s host country. If community formation offline is subject to geographic proximity and face-to-face interactions, then community formation online is subject to the mechanisms of computer-mediated communication which also shape digital spaces and virtual ethnic neighborhoods.

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