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Introduction

On Conceptualizing Community

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At the very moment that there is talk about the loss of "real" community, many theorists, researchers, and practitioners – groups who don't typically "speak" to one another – all appear to share a common interest in the community enabled by the Internet (Jones, 1995, 1998; Kiesler, 1997; Loader, 1997; Mitchell, 1995; Rheingold, 1993; Shields, 1996; Smith & Kollack, 1999). These discussions range from the need to redefine community, based on the dynamic and seemingly elusive qualities of virtual community; to concern for appropriate indices and measures for describing a community in the process of rapid change; to efforts to identify the nature of users, how they are interacting, and their needs.

Several features of the virtual world contribute to the recent proliferation of references to, and the self-referencing of particular sites as, virtual communities. These features include: (a) an image of a community to which a core of users/participants returns over time, with whom a community might be built out (providing feedback, lending a volunteer hand, contributing to discussions and activity, etc.); (b) distinctions between physical and virtual communities in terms of temporal and spatial possibilities; and (c) the multilayered quality of communicative space that allows for the mingling of different conversations, the linking of conversations across Web sites, and the archiving of discussions, information, and the like, that permits social exchange around site resources at a future time.

In this chapter, we explore the ways individuals and groups are using the Internet to build communities.* *Virtual communities* involve a combination

* Of course, it is not possible to take an "objective" position on these issues. We have a Constructivist impulse to help bring virtual community into existence. We have been working with groups who seek to expand the realm of social possibility through the Internet, and this is reflected in our discourse (Bourdieu, 1991).

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of physical and virtual interaction, social imagination, and identity. They may be distinguished from *physical communities* in that virtual communities can extend the range of community, and individuals can tailor their personal communities (Bauman, 2000; Wellman, 2001).

The archiving of online interactions makes possible forms of interaction that can be both more flexible and more durable than face-to-face interactions. The ongoing availability of resources positions participants to revise their images of themselves, as well as the range of interactions in which participants engage. In addition, new and more subtle shifts in identity are made possible. While many of the early discussions of virtual community focused on large identity shifts (e.g., men could masquerade as women) more recent work has shown that these kinds of shifts are perhaps not that important (Herring, 1994, 1995, 1996; O'Brien, 1999). The ability to come to identify with a group online, and support to do so, actually provides a scaffold for a different and enhanced sense of possibility for individuals (see Renninger & Shumar, this volume).

The discourse of virtual community that often comes from some core Internet users and technological enthusiasts, however, has been branded potentially exclusionary by some. This discourse has been labeled potentially racist and classist contributing to a digital divide (www.pbs.org/digitaldivide/). Further, to construe community in terms of interest is considered socially naïve.

The need to counter elitism is one for which we have a great deal of sympathy. This need, in itself, is not an argument against the existence of communities in the virtual world. The Internet provides advantages to those who question the existing power structure and offers counterexamples to discussions of community imagination (Anderson, 1991). Imagining community involves a discursive process of defining terrain and boundaries of community. The terrain and boundaries are constrained by differences of power among individuals. Nevertheless, the future of the Internet requires that those in positions of power be able to effect policy changes that will ensure a landscape that is not dominated by the elite (www.digitaldividenetwork.org/content/sections/index.cfm).

The critique that interest is too narrow a basis for defining community is more complex. This argument implies that communities have essential qualities: shared sets of physical resources and needs; mutual interdependence; and complex social organization including kinship, political, economic, and administrative layers. Since these qualities are only seen in small measure in virtual environments that are nothing like "real communities," the Internet and the Web could instead be understood as

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interesting technologies for advanced telecommunication. This critique suggests that the term "community" is being used to denote so many concepts that it no longer holds any meaning.

Certainly every commercial Web site appears to have added an interactive layer to attract more traffic. Several software organizations are currently trying to leverage users by promoting community to support costs – users can answer each other's questions rather than taking up valuable company time and phone lines. On the other hand, to assume that there is an essential set of criteria that defines community and social interaction is unnecessarily limiting. Clearly there is a great deal of diversity in the ways people are using the Internet and the range of online social interaction that occurs (Kling, 2000). Despite the wide range of types of social groupings on the Internet and the interaction they make possible, each type is organized in a way that reflects the particular forms of interaction it makes possible (Hakken, 1999). Such principles of organization are idiosyncratic because they are socially constructed. The forms of interaction that evolve, furthermore, might best be understood as both symbols of and participants' internalized images of possibilities for community (Renninger & Shumar, this volume).

In the context of different sets of social arrangements and different personal needs, the individuals and the groups described in this volume strategize ways in which the Internet can enhance their collective needs. The Internet can also provide new resources that are both reliable and usable. These new groups and strategies are part of the spatial and temporal transformation of social life in contemporary societies.

Community As Symbol and Activity

Implicit in the current debate about whether the Web enables virtual community are some classic sociological assumptions about community. Efforts to define community typically assume a Tönniesian opposition of gemeinschaft and gesellschaft. Gemeinschaft for Tönnies (1887/1957) is the coherent community in which culture and family are intact, and social life is whole because of this. This is a central concept for modern sociology. The contemporary sociological assumption is that modernity results in a loss of traditional community values and structures and replaces them with impersonal relationships and fragmented cultural values that constitute gesellschaft.

Cohen (1985) showed that this assumption of traditional communities being replaced by modern society is part of the larger Durkheimian

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(and perhaps Marxian and Weberian) tradition in sociology. Durkheim (1984) posed two main forms of social organization: mechanical and organic solidarity. Mechanical solidarity describes communities built on close ties among kin groups where reciprocity binds the group together. Organic solidarity describes modern institutions that replaced the traditional forms of organization. He argued that mechanical and organic solidarity can exist side by side in the same society at the same time, although the larger tradition turns them into alternative moments in the historical development of society (Cohen, 1985). In the Durkheimian scheme, an ethnic neighborhood in a large city, for example, might be a pocket of mechanical solidarity within the most advanced and organically organized city. It was not necessarily Durkheim's intent to posit that history reflects movement toward increased individual autonomy and impersonal institutional structures that replace the functions of traditional kith and kin and away from mechanical solidarity and close personal attachments. Such a definition of community would be tautological.

Cohen (1985) suggested that community tends to be defined by social scientists as that which we have lost to modernity. They create a kind of fiction about the relation of time and historical movement that does not apply to many specific locales. This type of fiction has an impact upon how we are positioned to think about the building of virtual communities even if we are unfamiliar with the assumptions that discussions of community imply. The definition of community informs the image held, the words used to describe community, and the sets of expectations concerning what community can be. The definition is further complicated since, as mentioned earlier, so many companies are trying to use the term "community" to do everything from building brand awareness to trying to get users to provide free technical support. We must recognize that there are many strategies and diverse goals in the uses of the term "community" and in the efforts to build community online.

In the context of the larger public narrative about the loss of community, another narrative that stems from a long history of nostalgia for the spirit of community has developed (Oldenburg, 1989; Putnam, 2000). This narrative focuses on recapturing community. Anderson (1991) points out that all communities – with the possible exception of foraging bands – are imagined. The image of the loving, close family and community emerges from a collective past but is, in fact, a thoroughly modern myth that meets current needs. Traditional communities were organized according to a system of power in which the church, kinship, and kingship could be quite brutal. Traditional communities were not based

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on intimate personal relationships and bonds of caring. Furthermore, Anderson suggests that nationalism could supplant the older imaginings of organization, religion, and the dynastic realm only when specific cultural conceptions of antiquity "lost their axiomatic grip on men's minds" (Anderson, 1991). Likewise, we would argue that the rise of the virtual comes at a moment when the organization of community has become more individualized and less structured by larger social forces of class, work, geographic location, and the like (Bauman, 2000; Castells, 1996, 1999; Wellman, 2001). Interestingly, it appears that virtual communities have led us to a discourse and potential reality of what in the past had only been a utopian version of community.

For example, efforts to construct small towns and utopian communities throughout the United States starting in the eighteenth century were considered to be experiments in modernity. In the present era, these experiments are now construed as exemplars of the "traditional communities" of family, kin, shared values, and greater intimacy when at one time they were suspect and ridiculed. Online communities are the most recent inheritors of this mantle of experimentation. It is not surprising that the discourse of community is ubiquitous and distinctions between traditional and modern are once again being used to explore the new postmodern utopia – the high-tech social form that can return us to so-called traditional values and intimate personal relationships. This is the language we have for describing our present experience.

Posing ideal categories of gemeinschaft and gesellschaft simply because they are comfortable and feel right, however, may keep us from recognizing forces that structure social relationships and, specifically for our current purposes, the forms of social relationships that are being enacted in computer-mediated communication. The categories are not necessarily reflections of the realities of community. Interaction over the Web, for example, is fluid and dynamic. It does not easily fit former static images of community. The process of community building holds the potential for mapping onto ideals associated with community that previously could only be described as mythic.

Physical and Virtual Communities

Differences of spatial and temporal organization contribute to the tendency to see physical communities as more organic, where contents of interest are shared in shared space, while virtual communities by necessity have a greater level of intentionality. In fact, physical communities are

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generally understood to exist in contiguous space and to be temporally synchronous. On the basis of spatial and temporal dimensions, people in physical communities share concerns, resources, quality of life, help, and so forth. Internet communities are more typically conceptualized as electronic town halls (Mitchell, 1995; Rheingold, 1993), lifestyle enclaves (Renninger & Shumar, this volume; see also Bellah et al., 1985), or lifestyle groups (Burrows & Nettleton, this volume) that are spatially and temporally dislocated.

The ways in which land, water, and other resources can be divided up carry with them material dimensions that lends substance to the symbolic boundaries of physical communities. In virtual communities, spatial and temporal boundaries are entirely symbolic. Resources themselves are symbols. Symbolic boundaries and resources are all fodder for the imagination of what a given community consists of and can be, as well as the kinds of interaction that this new type of engagement reflects.

As a result, groups who cast the Internet as a creative new social medium typically describe the lurker, or noncontributor, as someone who is shirking social responsibility. Concerns about lurking exist precisely because the virtual world has no physical presence, and interaction in this world becomes more highlighted (Smith, 1999). Yet, it is also the case that in virtual communities, just as in physical communities, not everyone is an active participant in all things, all the time (Zhu, 1998). In fact, people can take up different roles, and they can change their conceptions about their possibilities as a function of their activity with a site over time (Renninger & Shumar, this volume). In this way, the lurker could be construed as a potentially productive participant who is not ready to make a contribution, is reflecting on follow-up to previous contents, and so forth. Participants are in different stages of "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In the virtual community, relationship is typically defined not by proximity but by contents of individual interest – classes of objects, ideas, or events about which participants have differing levels of both stored knowledge and stored value (see discussion in Renninger, 2000). The fact that virtual communities are defined by contents for which community has an interest is one of the reasons that critics tend to see virtual communities as something other than community. Participants' connections to community are both cognitive and affective, rather than simply spatial and temporal.

A specificity of connection to virtual communities is qualitatively different than the connection participants typically have for physical

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communities. The connection to virtual communities is supported by affordances (Gibson, 1966) that invoke imagination about and identification with a site, such as autonomy, time, space, choice, opportunity, support, and depth of content. Furthermore, the learning that is undertaken as participants work with a site has an agency and opportunity for changed understanding of self (see Renninger & Shumar, this volume). This opportunity also appears to differ from the range of opportunities available in physical communities.

As a symbolic construction, any community, whether physical or virtual, depends upon the images that its participants hold. Further, all communities depend upon how participants enact the ideas they have. Any given participant's community (or status therein) is often the result of actions that are both intended and unintended. Thus, participants' conceptions of community are highly fluid and multifaceted. Not only does a given community have the potential to be understood in different ways by its participants, but this same community also is likely to differ for the same participant as a function of circumstance.

Barth (1981) suggested that anthropologists have had a tendency to describe a group in terms of homogeneous culture. He argues that a group can be described in terms of how members imagine the community's boundaries. As such, he suggests that a similar culture emerges from the experience of boundedness, rather than as the cause of boundedness. Likewise, Cohen (1985) described the boundaries between groups as complex symbolic matter, meaning that the simple boundaries seen by outsiders are not the most important distinctions for insiders. The boundaries for insiders are often overlapping and involve finer and finer distinctions that eventually point to basic units of interaction. The United States as a boundary is significant to those outside the United States, for example, but for its citizens its boundary is rarely thought about, except in connection to outsiders. The more significant boundaries for U.S. citizens are states, cities, counties, neighborhoods, and street blocks. One could also then consider the boundedness of social groups that cut across some of these smaller geographic boundaries and result in additional groupings (e.g., a gay and lesbian community alliance, an environmental organization).

Communities on the Internet underscore points made by both Cohen and Barth about the symbolic nature of community. Rather than assuming that a community is one-dimensional and can, therefore, be identified from the outside, it is important to consider what a virtual community means, what it offers, what it affords its participants, and what its boundaries are. Individuals can become known across discussion groups and

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several related use net groups (Smith, 1999). A list such as alt.postmodern may, in fact, be part of a complex weave of community over the Internet for those who contribute to it, even though discussion lists might not immediately appear to fit our working definition of community.

An ideal of community apparently leads people to invest themselves in the Internet and the sets of imagined and desired interactions the Internet affords. In fact, wholly to embracing or rejecting discussions of virtual community building is logically difficult. It is only possible to trace the effects of these discussions on groups and individuals as they work to produce a discourse about community in the process of their interactions. Building-out a virtual community that harnesses the potential of interaction entails a vision of connections between the community and its participants. Social imagination for both groups is enabled and constrained by norms (e.g., a protocol for interaction) that in turn provide the basis for an imagination about what is possible (for an example, see Renninger & Shumar, this volume).

The boundary between physical and virtual communities is permeable, however, making it difficult to conceptualize either form of community as a completely separate entity. Even though the utopian vision of the physical community recasting itself as a virtual community can backfire (e.g., virtual communication is reduced to an online public opinion poll), the risk of not realizing the potential of virtual communication exists for more established communities on the Web.

Thus, for those working to encourage community development, the relation between physical and virtual community can be quite explicit. For example, a physical community can re-imagine itself and its informational resources as a virtual community to solicit opinion, to provide information and resources, and, as such, to expand upon dreams of a more democratic polity.

The relation between physical and virtual communities can also be more implicit. If a teacher in a school can engage a separate set of colleagues who are part of that teacher's "virtual community," this contributes to how that teacher is seen and the ways he or she interacts with in-school colleagues. In a real way, both sets of colleagues may be part of the teacher's "community," but making the distinction (or sometimes erasing the distinction) between physical and virtual community may have significant implications for the teacher's work life. It seems that virtual communities can also be characterized by the complexity of making and unmaking boundaries. These boundaries signal community for

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participants who enact these visions within overlapping fields of political and economic constraint.

Although the interplay of community is a complex weave of participants' desires and strategies, community over the Web is often reduced to written communication that may be supplemented with sound and images. Like the telephone, computer-mediated communication facilitates communication between people. Like the radio and television, it also has facilitated the dissemination of sound and images to a broad constituency. The Internet, however, has produced dislocations of time and space in the process of offering new means for communicating. As such, the Internet has led to the bonding of people as a hallmark of the modern community. The fluidity of boundaries and flexibility of how community is defined make it possible for participants to enact forms of community in the virtual world and extend the definition of community as a function of social imagination.

As international email conversations become quick and easy, and chat rooms eliminate spatial barriers and make long-distance sociability instantaneous, many researchers studying computer-mediated communication and the virtual world have had to grapple with the potential for communication technologies to compress time and space as well (Harvey, 1990). This compression not only has had profound consequences for the organization of work and the movement of labor, capital, and goods (Harvey, 1990), but it has also had profound consequences for the individuals who interact with one another over these vast distances and for their local culture. These consequences have led to what Turkle (1995) called an "identity crisis," wherein the sense of self in virtual spaces becomes multiple as a function of diverse relationships and social arenas.

It is the case that time and space can be expanded as well as compressed, however. Email correspondences are quicker than the mail (hence the term "snail mail") but much slower than face-to-face conversations. Further, email interactions tend to have aspects of each of these modes of communication; email interactions are a little like letters and a little like conversations. Depending on the form of communicative interaction they are compared to, email can be faster or slower than the forms of communicative interaction to which a person is accustomed. Many people email simple requests because it is less invasive than a phone call and hence seen as more polite. In this instance, the individual is willing to wait longer for the interaction to unfold than it would over the

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phone. As such, communicative interaction is stretched out. These more stretched-out conversations have become a part of daily life in many social arenas.

Virtual interaction can also be thought of as creating more space for social interaction and hence as expanding space. Online components to physical interactions in college courses (Polin, 2000) provide a virtual space in addition to the physical space for class meetings. These virtual spaces may have many "rooms" where there are discussion boards, live chat rooms, or even a virtual space with avatars in which to interact (see Schlager et al., this volume).

All virtual groups, whether they are electronic town halls or interest groups, are positioned to take advantage of the space–time flexibility of the Internet. The quality of compressing or expanding space–time contributes to making online interaction appealing to people. Wellman and his colleagues (Chmielewski & Wellman, 2000) suggest that, even though new users of the Internet may initially substitute online "weak" social relationships for physically close "strong" social relationships (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998; Nie & Erbring, 2000), over time this effect disappears. In fact, long-term users of the Internet are more likely to maintain contact with those they are close to, including those in close physical proximity, with the result of stronger ties between colleagues, family, and so forth.

Transformations of time and space and the new forms of interaction facilitated by the Internet and information technologies have required individuals to reconsider their understanding of the possibilities for ways in which they and others elect to come together. Transformations also affect the implications of these possibilities for what individuals had previously imagined community to be (Anderson, 1991; Jones, 1997). These participants have a sense of belonging that influences their interactions, whether they are reflectively aware of it or not. The participants are involved in evaluating who belongs. This evaluative process influences the language participants use to describe their activity. It also defines relationships of power or the shape of a community (national boundaries rather than kin or religious affiliation) and participants' imagination about themselves and possibilities (Markus & Nurius, 1986) in this social reality (Anderson, 1991).

The process of imagination that characterizes belonging may involve overlapping groups of people and be differently construed in various contexts. The process is a necessary component of community building, regardless of whether a community is a physical community. On the Web, however, tools (e.g., email chat rooms, instant messaging [IM]) allow

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