

The Significance of Virtual Communities

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This article explores a number of debates which have developed around the significance of 'virtual communities'. It poses new ways of thinking about community with more traditional forms and asks 'what is different?' and 'what is the same?' about community built on the web. This piece also examines some of the claims made as to the nature of virtual communities and asks whether they are the democratic, alternative, liberating, safe and effective environments that many claim them to be?

In his recent work *The Internet Galaxy*, Manuel Castells explores a number of debates which have developed around the significance of 'virtual communities' (2001:116-136). The work of writers such as Barry Wellman (1979) and Claude Fischer (1982), he maintains, has long demonstrated that '...people do not build their meaning in local societies....because they select their relationships on the basis of their affinities' (2001:126). Castells has gone so far as to claim that '...the major transformation of sociability in complex societies took place with the substitution of networks for spatial communities as major forms of sociability' (2001:127). His position holds that although 'place-based sociability' and 'territorially defined community...has not disappeared in the world at large ... it certainly plays a minor role in structuring social relationships for the majority of the population in developed societies' (2001:126).

For Castells and Wellman, exactly where we reside is only marginally important in the construction of our friendships and social groups and we choose instead to spend more time with people whom we have identified as sharing common interests rather than merely common spaces. The transformation of western societies from predominantly rural to an urban way of life began this process and the introduction of communications tools such as efficient postal systems and improved transport mechanisms have meant that it has become possible to maintain important interpersonal relationships over distance. The development of telephony over the past century and the introduction of the internet as a communication tool have been heralded as technological breakthroughs which further cement this process. These communication devices enable instant access to people all over the world, and have been perceived as breaking down any remaining barriers of space and time which have hitherto hindered communication across the globe. Castells argues that the internet is the most appropriate medium of communication in an emerging network society (1998) and that it will play an increasingly important role, not only in the way that people choose to communicate with each other but also in the way we form social relationships.

The internet is indeed a powerful tool which not only enables communication between individuals, but which allows whole groups of people to interact in virtual or 'cyber' space. The space which it provides is both private and communal. It can sustain intimate, personal encounters as well as open, accessible forums. It is a space where individuals can learn about each other and community can flourish. Indeed if Castells' thesis is correct and internet communication will come to **dominate** social relations in the twenty-first century, then sociologists must rethink and rework existing theories of community in order to acknowledge this fundamental shift in the way we construct our most meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Traditional ways of thinking about 'community'

As has often been outlined, the term 'community' has many meanings (Crow and Allan 1994:3-7). Wilmott (1986) distinguishes three categories of community which he terms 'territorial' or 'place communities', 'communities of interest' and 'communities of attachment'. Each of these typologies is presaged on a commonality, in the first case this is a shared place of residence, in the second it is shared characteristics such as ethnic origin or occupation and in the third it is a shared agreement or compact which brings people together. The three types of community can coincide and in such

circumstances, it is suggested, any community feeling would prove to be particularly strong (Crow and Allan 1994:5). The perfect community is thereby often portrayed as one in which individuals and groups naturally organise themselves to work to actively shape their shared environment, where people act together and '...participate in efforts to address their needs collectively' (Contractor and Peterson Bishop 2000:152). This commonality and participation is what distinguishes a community from many other social groups. Most groupings which are considered 'communities', however, fall far short of this standard, yet this ideal type of community is accorded an almost mythic status and is seen as the perfect model of social relations and a state to which neighbourhoods and other social groupings should aspire. Community is considered a positive symbiotic state invoking ideas of co-operation, lack of conflict and democratic decision-making (Robson 2000:71), citizenship, inclusion and contentment (Etzioni 1993:6).

In previous times community and place were intimately linked. Lack of mobility meant that people had little choice but to find their community in the places in which they lived and worked. Since the advent of mass communication, however, traditional place-based communities have become less central and communities of interest and attachment grown in importance as our potential circles of acquaintance have become vastly expanded. Alongside these developments there has been an increased tendency to live and shape our lives through individual choices, and not to live by age-old traditions and norms laid down by previous generations, enforced by community sanction. Wellman (1999) terms this a move towards 'networked individualism', the building of social relationships which are more fragmented, dispersed, and specialised than in previous social systems but over which their members can assert control and choice.

Building community in cyberspace

It is in this context that we must consider the building of virtual communities. The internet is a relatively new communications medium, yet already there are numerous ways in which people have set out to build community in cyberspace. The internet has been considered an ideal medium for the building and maintaining of community and as uniquely able to separate community and place entirely. Despite its very recent incursion into the fabric of daily life for many in the west, social networks of people who might otherwise have never conversed and shared ideas and opinions have already been formed over the internet. How important these networks are to their members, or will become to them, is yet to be fully and adequately researched as the emergence of these 'virtual communities' is so novel that their potential cannot yet have been realised. Nevertheless, since the possibilities afforded by the internet first began to enter into public consciousness great claims have been made in popular writing, academic and policy discourses as to just this potential. As early as 1995 Nicholas Negroponte predicted that in the near future 'We will socialise in digital neighbourhoods' (1995:7) while in the same year Christina Odone, suggested that:

The Net has *already* [my emphasis] managed to promise a reordered world where the individual can sample a community life that has long been eroded by the rush for individual gains, the rending of the fabric of family life, the polarisation of an economic system that makes for haves and have nots (1995:10).

Powerful though the technology is, it is not only the technical innovations which the internet has provided which seem to hold out the possibility of building an expanded and improved community life in cyberspace. The internet has also been described as an inherently open, accessible and democratic medium within which community-building is not only possible but can flourish and take hitherto unknown forms. The development of different internet-based communication tools:

...has encouraged a wide range of debates to emerge surrounding the potential of digital computer networks (or "telematics") for supporting new types of public, social and cultural exchange.' (Graham and Aurigi 1997:20).

Surf the internet and before long the chatrooms, MUDs^[1], newsgroups, bulletin boards and networks can be discovered which offer the potential spaces for community-building in cyberspace.

Some have speculated that building community in cyberspace will result in novel forms of interaction which are totally 'virtual' in that they will have no geographical referent and will be truly global in scope (Rheingold 1994) and others have suggested that community building on the internet will be utilised to extend and enhance existing relationships which are based in physical spaces (Benedict 1991, Schuler 1996). Most writing on virtual communities, however, implies that what will be built in cyberspace will improve on traditional forms of community. Traditional communities, it is suggested, are either disappearing as people become generally less socially motivated and follow more individualistic and self-interested courses of action or are becoming subject to intolerable strains as problems such as poverty and crime tear them apart. It has also been noted that place-based communities are liable to fracture along religious, racial or ideological lines and have been sites of exclusion as well as inclusion (Crow and Allen 1994). It has been suggested too that those who have been marginalized and excluded for whatever reason within their face-to-face, physically bounded environments may find their spaces to communicate and interrelate in a different realm which is unrelated to the physical - within the 'virtual community'.

What is different about virtual communities?

Cyberspace has been considered an alternative space in which individuals and small groups, rather than multi-nationals and nation-states, control both the flow and availability of information and the uses to which that information is put. Anyone with access to an internet-ready computer and a basic knowledge of how the internet works can post ideas and information which they consider important and build their own interest groups and networks, and many do. Alongside the White House website, small, less well-known political organisations can also post their manifestoes, activities and agendas. Millions of internet users can potentially tap into these sites and connect with like-minded people all over the world. For the first time the internet allows the possibility for the creation of truly global communities. It is an inexpensive and relatively accessible method through which to advertise a presence, inform others and share ideas and opinions. The global communities forged in cyberspace can also be seen as a welcome alternative to the realm of global elites which retain power and dominion over the everyday lives of people worldwide. Virtual communities have the potential to empower their users, raise an alternative agenda, give access to different ways of seeing the world, foster international perspectives on important issues and to encourage a global response to matters which affect us all.^[2]

Cyberspace is a realm which is filled with ideas and as such the physical abilities of its users and the bodies which they inhabit are generally unseen. In a world which is obsessed by appearance, which judges others by certain physical standards, by colour of skin, by age, by dress perceiving inability to meet certain standards as failure, then the internet is heralded as a space where physical barriers can be overcome and where it is possible to reach out to others without divisions of space, culture, race or gender intervening. In cyberspace it is assumed a person will be judged by their ideas alone, revealing only that which they wish to share with others and without fear of being rejected if they do not conform to 'the ideal'. On the internet, we are often reminded, people can even adopt alternative personas and become whoever they wish to be. It is unsurprising then that it has been suggested that:

...through use of, and exposure to, these new technologies, users will adopt new forms of behaviour explicitly linked to the technology itself' (Rutter 2001:371).

It has also been argued that virtual communities are particularly focussed and effective in their aims. Wellman (1999) argues that the internet allows the development of communities of interest which are uniquely built on specialized relationships. Communities built in cyberspace, he argues, are self-selected, they do not depend on the chance meetings, whether through encounters in neighbourhood or at work, but are based upon the active selection of community members by participants on the basis of personal interests and personality traits. Unlike 'physical communities', these 'virtual communities' have no need to negotiate difference or disorder and are far removed from the 'dense, disorderly, overwhelming' urban spaces in which communities have been forged in the twentieth century (Sennett 1970:xvi)^[3]. Wellman is also encouraged by the fact that the constituency from

which communities formed via the internet are selected, is in no way bound by geography but potentially consists of the millions who are on-line across the globe. He writes:

For better or worse, the shift to a personalized, wireless world will afford truly personal communities [emphasis in original] that supply support, sociability, information and a sense of belonging to individuals (Wellman 2000:15)

Wellman clearly welcomes the growth of such communities and sees in them the potential to develop highly significant relationships. He makes the case that, because these communities are not constrained by geography or chance encounters, they are fully chosen by their members. For Wellman, this leads to relationships which are purer in essence, uncluttered by the expected niceties and polite conversations which characterise our physically bounded relationships and avoiding the fear and danger which can be part of encounters in disorderly streets. Harcourt suggests that this aspect of the technology has been particularly useful in encouraging women's use of the internet, adding that this medium can '...involve women who due to their culture or locality would not be in a position to voice their opinion.' (1999:2) in other spaces.

Dave Carter of Manchester City Council, UK, summed up many of the ideas which have gone into constructing the ideal virtual community when he wrote:

The ability of small-scale initiatives in cities and regions to use the advantages of the technologies, to use cyberspace, to create communication and activity networks free from the usual spatial and temporal constraints is a crucial element in providing a democratic counter-balance to other technological and global trends. The essential starting for this must, however, be a commitment to creating services and applications that are easy (and cheap) to use, that grab people's interest and imagination so that they want to use them and that, having used them, they become part of their lives enough that they would fight to not take them away. (Carter 1997:151)

What is the same about virtual communities ?

Virtual communities then, promise their users open, democratic, alternative spaces in which they can find people with similar interests and opinions and in which people are free to share and debate ideas in a safe environment without fear of intimidation and petty prejudice. Such communities would indeed be novel, welcoming and highly desirable spaces for many potential users. However, a look at many virtual communities will reveal a different story. Just as the ideal community has rarely, if ever, been achieved in physical space, communities in cyberspace also fall short of these standards. Some of the claims made as to the unique nature of such communities are now examined.

Are virtual communities more open and accessible?

Problems of access to virtual communities have been addressed by many projects which provide free or affordable internet services in public places. The best of these also provide training for potential users. However access to cyberspace does not necessarily lead to use of the medium. Although millions do connect to the internet regularly there are millions more who do not or cannot. This leaves existing communities on the internet denuded of many potential contributors. In addition, the main language of the internet is English which excludes many from full participation on the web. The technology is a necessary but not sufficient condition for community building in cyberspace. Users have to be able to find virtual communities, be motivated to join and interested in sustaining contact with a particular group

Are virtual communities more democratic?

Miles and Gershuny write that communication through computers can create 'new forms of social participation' (1986:32) involving formerly marginalised groups. Kelly (1994) sees the technology of the internet as an inherently collective system, controlled by no one power and founded on non-linear communication patterns so creating new organisational possibilities, permitting new ways of thinking, breaking down old patterns of command and control and discouraging linear, autocratic system

management. Internet technologies certainly allow direct links to be made between users. In theory, if armed with a person's email address it is possible to send messages directly to that individual bypassing any gatekeepers and without having to make personal appointments which might be refused. This possibility for direct lines of communication between individuals has been used to argue that communication on the internet is less hierarchical than traditional forms of contact and that the internet therefore allows the voices of many to be heard (Horwitz and Malley 1998). However it is likely that those who protect themselves from unsolicited contacts in the real world will do so in their online presence too. How many CEOs or members of government, for example, will read and answer all their emails? Nevertheless many networks have used direct emailing as a campaigning tool to make their views known and to ensure that the recipients are aware of the strength of feeling on a particular issue^[4].

Are virtual communities alternative spaces?

The internet can certainly create a space for alternative political agendas to be presented. Castells uses a number of examples in his work to demonstrate the emergence within a 'network society' of an 'electronic grassroots culture' and 'interactive society' (1996:354) which suggest libertarian and communal undercurrents. However, many of the internet sites which purport to be community websites are little more than 'electronic brochures' (Aurigi 2000:35) for a city or region advertising city-wide services for a resident or tourist population, reflecting a great deal of private sector input. Kanfer and Kolar (1995) surveyed all the active city sites which they found in the USA CityLink Web directory in 1995 and found that, in the main, their content and external links were heavily weighted to information about locally sited businesses. Indeed while 80% of sites carried information on local businesses they found that: 'relatively few cities provide information about libraries, health care, or local community networks'.

Furthermore they classified the majority of these sites as tourist rather than community-related and '...provided by an Internet business on a commercial server...' (1995:Slide 8). They were less often provided by public institutions such as universities or city governments. Some sites were set up and maintained by individual residents, but these were small in number, providing 'idiosyncratic and incomplete information' (1995: Slide 8). This profile of web-space they suggest, demonstrates that the main providers of information in physical space are also dominating cyberspace (1995 : Slide 9). They also suggest that many of these sites have been developed by commercial organisations involved in selling or developing technology - the 'dot.coms' - with the primary aim of attracting Internet users to their business, rather than to provide citizens with relevant information.

Community networks exist as an exception to this top-down approach providing websites relevant to a specific locality^[5]. They take a more grass-roots approach to community-building through the internet. As Day and Harris explain:

c-nets [are]...initiatives which come about because people initiate a process: they get together locally, as well as communicating on-line, to learn about and develop electronic platforms, in order to increase their options for communication. This process is part of community development. (Day and Harris, 1998:5.8)

Community networks are much less in evidence on the Internet than commercially-sponsored city-sites and because of their local, 'grassroots', nature may be difficult for the casual internet browser to locate and explore. Such virtual communities can often be developed as closed networks for reasons related to commercial considerations (the user must pay to join) or for community privacy^[6]. These networks typically give access to information about local events and activities, health and government services and to an e-mail service for local subscribers. Bulletin Boards have also been used by some to host local debates, allowing users to be information providers as well as consumers. These community networks have been hailed as exemplars of how to build community on the internet (Schuler 1996) and each has signed up to a philosophy which aims to foster control by their local user-base. However, the networks cover quite large geographical areas, These are not small tightly knit local communities based in neighbourhoods, but provide resources for much wider networks of people. Day and Harris (1998) warn against the danger of community networks growing too large. Their research has led them to conclude that this increases the tendency for community networks to become dominated by the more powerful interests in an area. They favour community networks based on small, 'neighbourhood areas' which are 'genuinely local and representative' (Day and Harris

1997:5.17) while acknowledging that this is difficult to achieve. Very few community networks meet these criteria^[7].

Are virtual communities liberating for their users?

Wellman argues that virtual communities grant their members greater freedom because their users are not tied to physical locations. Virtual encounters can be managed from anywhere in the world as long as the user has access to the requisite technology. In addition the lack of a fixed location for these communities to engage means it is not necessary to travel long distances to meet at stated times and places. Virtual communities afford their members greater freedom of action, he suggests, because they disengage people from the often rigid roles which are associated with ideas of household, neighbourhood, region or nation. So internet users benefit from communicating in a freer electronic realm, a medium where strictly imposed codes are irrelevant. However previous communication technologies have also worked in similar ways - communication via the telephone and post have been utilised for long-distance communication for some time and access to these systems is far more widely spread across the world's populace. Mobile phones have offered even greater freedom of movement, so how is communication via the internet fundamentally different. Granted the internet affords a faster means of communication and appears to offer greater flexibility, especially to the person on the move, however, it is another thing to suggest that social relationships which have been forged through this medium will prove to be fundamentally different from those which have not or that existing cultural values and power relations in society will lose significance as a result.

Are virtual communities more focussed and effective?

In his writing on virtual community Wellman has implied that people who find each other and converse on the internet will engage in encounters which are more focussed than those which take place in the physical world. To enter into cyberspace and to find a community of interest, he argues, takes studied thought and application, the result of which will be a more meaningful conversation. However this presupposes we share Wellman's understanding of which engagements convey meaning and significance. All sorts of meetings can be advantageous, enjoyable and rewarding, not only the previously arranged and managed. Wellman ignores the potential benefits and also pleasures associated with informal contacts and chance encounters in shared physical spaces of neighbourhood and community. In physical space encounters are often unplanned and everyday life can be chaotic and disordered. Wellman's position suggests a degree of planning and design in social intercourse which is often not present, or desirable for many people whose time can be severely limited by the requirements of running work, household and social lives. In real life one meeting can serve numerous purposes and this can be a strength rather than a limitation. Time spent in any typical usenet newsgroup or chatroom will also reveal a far less than orderly and focussed conversation taking place.

Are virtual communities safe places?

Discrimination, oppression, prejudice and fear can certainly bar people from full involvement in social interaction and it has been suggested that those who are excluded in physical spaces can find a safe place to interact in virtual space. Slouka has argued, for example, that interaction in cyberspace offers humanity the opportunity to transcend the ideas which oppress and exclude others. He recounts:

I'd heard it said...that the disembodied nature of cyberspace was precisely its strongest suit, that because it was disembodied, it would teach us to value quickness of mind over beauty, wit over physical power, the content of our character over the colour of our skin...the violent would see the futility of their ways and the intolerant would come to understand that human beings are more alike than different (1995:48)

Wellman further suggests that as people later choose to reveal their physical characteristics to other members of their electronic communities, they can challenge stereotypes which might previously have held them back. In this way, he suggests, society as a whole, ICT-user and non-user alike, benefits as prejudice and stereotyping withers away. Yet this argument, by focusing on what cannot be perceived in internet communiqués, ignores so much of what makes up the distinctiveness between human beings and the culturally coded behaviours which we carry with us but which remain

largely hidden from view. Bourdieu refers to class differences, for example, as an 'invisible reality that cannot be shown but which organizes agents' practices and representations'. (1998:10)

It is erroneous, therefore, to suggest that by merely discarding a **physical** presence we can leave behind so much more of our background, experiences and culture which help to distinguish us from others. Even purely text-based conversations can reveal a great deal about a person through the sender's levels of literacy, tastes, opinions, use of language and range of experience. It is more likely, then, that distinctions and patterns of exclusion encountered in physical space will transfer to the virtual. Exclusion may even be further intensified for those without the means to engage in electronic conversation in the first instance or for whom the electronic realm appears to be a forbidding or alien environment.

Spender (1995) looks at distinctions from the perspective of gender, she gives various examples of gender bias in the use and design of computing tools, and outlines how women are socialised into different 'relationships with technical objects' (1995:172). She discusses how women are less likely to learn computing skills by playing with technology than are men and that, as much computer software '...is presently formatted, it is more in tune with the disposition and training of boys' (1995:175). She also reports that women in cyberspace can be at risk of experiencing levels of sexual harassment which are equal to those experienced in physical spaces^[8] indicating that Wellman and others are naively optimistic in their view of the inclusive reality of cyberspace.

While there are a great many welcoming and inclusive sites in cyberspace there exist also the sites of hate organisations which use the technology to spread prejudice and fears. Email accounts can be 'spammed' with unwanted messages, individuals can be 'flamed' with insulting or threatening emails, pornography is rife on the internet and finds its way into many commercial email services. Spender (1995) has even recounted examples of virtual rape in chatrooms. These experiences suggest that users of virtual communities can be open to prejudice and attack in their cyber-worlds.

The promise of virtual communities

Vibrant virtual communities are apparent on the internet and take many forms, however many of the claims made as to their superior character are overstated. They seem to hold out the promise of safe and inclusive communication but in reality, many of the problems which plague physical community are present in their virtual counterparts. This is hardly surprising given that virtual communities are forged and maintained by people living in the material world and that their users will bring problems, prejudices and limitations experienced in the physical world into their cyber-communities. Despite the tendency for many to herald new technologies as the saviours of society our future is forged from our past. Neither Wellman's 'networked individual', nor the discerning and enlightened virtual communicator form the social majority, nor may they ever. Most people still find their sources of community in neighbourhood, kinship and contacts forged in physical spaces, while they may also experiment building social networks and friendships across cyberspace virtual communities have not yet replaced traditional means of building and maintaining community - however flawed these might be.

Questions

1. How closely does Wellman's description of a 'networked individual' mirror your own experience?
2. Where do you look for community?
3. Are traditional forms of community dead or dying?

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Notes

- [1] Multi-User Domains are worlds created in cyberspace where users interact and adopt virtual personas
- [2] While writing this article the international movement against war in Iraq was growing steadily. Millions of people were mobilised in demonstrations which took place simultaneously across the globe - internet mailing lists were seen as an important part of the success of these worldwide protests.
- [3] Sennett himself mourns the loss of disorder and difference which the search for 'purified communities' brings. He sees this as self-limiting and a denial of a sense of exploration and adventure (1970: 27-49)
- [4] For example in February 2003 the anti-war group 'move-on.org' succeeded in mobilising a virtual march on Washington so that the fax, e mail and telephone systems of the US Senate were jammed with anti-war messages in a co-ordinated campaign of action (Colorado Daily 28th Feb 2003)

[5] However, still other physically based communities have sought to make use of the internet but without affiliation to the community networks of which Schuler is an advocate.

[6] In 1995 the Blacksburg Electronic Village (BEV) closed its chat-lines to web-users outside their own network to protect BEV users from intimidating postings. In 2001 the chat-line link had been contracted out to a commercial organisation which could 'police' all postings and was open to all visitors once more.

[7] Perhaps the closest to the ideal network are the projects such as <http://www.redbrick.org/>, a small, locality-based community (in fact it is one block of social housing in Hulme, Manchester) intranet and world-wide-web space, which has been developed by the residents, and Brixton On-Line, a sophisticated site catering for a larger user-base but which includes a web-based gateway to information on local entertainment, services and businesses, as well as a community intranet and internet service for members only.

[8] This has been true of previous technologies too, even the telephone which has been adopted as a form of communication well used by women (Spender 1995: 191) can be used as a tool of harassment.

