

Virtual Communities: Seeking out community on the internet

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And we hear more and more about "virtual communities"-an exciting concept because, after all, all of the real ones have nearly disappeared. Perhaps almost-real ones will suffice for others, but I am unwilling to be part of a technology that can only exist if it drives me to consume more, which drains my will to seek out real community.

--Franklin Saige

Two of the most commonly discussed words in the contemporary academic circles that we all move through are "computers" and "community." Each, in their own right, is discussed with some vigor and dedication. A frequent topic is the intermingling of the two. What influence will computers have on community? Do groups of people who congregate on computer based interactive sites (USENET, mailing lists, MUDS, etc.) constitute a community? In the last few years, a number of sources have begun to question whether or not computer based groups really constitute communities. This attempt to differentiate computer based interaction from community interaction is interesting, in part because of the clarity such a project might lend to human interactions in both computer based and physical environments.

Since the subject of this project is the attempt to draw distinctions between communities-as understood in the physical and computer based environments, it would seem useful to ask first what is commonly meant by community and second what form of persuasive communication takes place in such settings. The first potential problem is the word "community." Without a clear understanding of what the term community represents, the resulting discussion would be meaningless-in the sense that it would be related to an unknown combination of individuals and could be misused if it was applied to assembled people not intended to be considered a community. This rather nebulous term has been discussed frequently, but unfortunately there is no clear understanding of the term because of its scope. Richard P. Hiskes, for example, observed that the term community is hard to understand because it seems to accept almost any definition. He noted that "community has always been a rather murky political concept, not because it defies all definitions given, but because it seems to collect them" (p. 21). Perhaps "community" creates problems for us because it tends to gather in meanings rather than reject them.

Dennis J. Coyle, from the University of California, Berkeley Department of Political Science agreed that community is a difficult concept to define, "Community, like society or the public interest, is a very plastic

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term; it can be molded into many different shapes to fit one's fancy" (p.13). In fact, according to Hiskes, the term community ranges in meaning from "totalitarianism to anarchistic and covering everything in between" (p. 21). Obviously, people have had a great deal of difficulty determining what it is that they mean when they use the term community.

This difficulty in defining what a community is may, in fact, result from the lack of distance people can achieve from the concept. It may well be that people cannot even understand who they are without an other to compare or contrast themselves with. Jean-Luc Nancy, of the University of Human Sciences of Strassbourg, claims that humans are constantly comparing themselves to one another. As a result, humans may only come to know themselves and others through that comparison. Nancy explained that "being in common means that singular beings are, present themselves, and appear only to the extent that they compare¹ (*comparaissent*), to the extent that they are exposed, presented, or offered to one another" (p. 58).

In the sense offered by Nancy, people do not exist as singular entities, they exist only when they are with other people, when they are compared. Because it is in this "space" created by comparison that people share community, they cannot escape community. There is no such thing as a person without community. Therefore, it is impossible for people to imagine a lack of community. Nancy contends that, even when people are thinking of themselves as individuals, they must always compare and leave open a space for community:

Human community does not disappear. It never disappears. The community resists: in a sense, as I have said, it is resistance itself. Without the compearance of being--or of singular beings--there would be nothing, or rather nothing but being appearing to itself, not even in common with itself, just immanent Being immersed in a dense pearance² (*parence*). The community resists this infinite immanence. The compearance of singular being--or of the singularity of being--keeps open a space, a spacing within immanence (p. 58).

As a result, even when people are thinking of themselves as singular beings, they must think of themselves as a singular in comparison to other singular beings and it is even that basic comparison between people which opens up the space for communities to exist. Unfortunately, this means that it is truly outside the realm of human experience to know what it means to not have a community.

Even without this existential reflection, community may be inseparable from the human condition. David W. Minar and Scott Greer quoted in Cochran expressed the human drive for community.

Community is indivisible from human actions, purposes and values. It expresses our vague yearnings for a community of desire, a communion with those around us, an extension of the bonds of kin and friend to all those who share a common fate with us (p. 36-37).

Since humans cannot experience a non-community, they have no frame of reference to evaluate the idea of community: They cannot compare community to non-community to determine what the traits of community

are. Definitions in the traditional sense, then, become problematic at best and impossible at worst. The best that they may hope to do is compare different communities and attempt to find minimal conditions for community. This is, in itself, quite difficult. The minimal conditions may be the existence of a person. How then could humans define a community?

Thomas B. Farrell, of the Northwestern University Department of Communication, attempted, in spite of these challenges, to give a sense of a community.

We live in places that are more than material. In addition to the institutional settings, and encounter forums that gather, shape, and constrain the topics and issues of rhetoric (the legislature, the courts, the coffee house or tavern) are symbolic "places" where we come to an abiding sense of affiliation with the needs, interests, deeds, and even unfinished accounts of others. And even though such a forum may be symbolically constituted, it is also a place with genuine boundary conditions for what belongs and what does not (p. 24)

In the sense in which Farrell has discussed community, it is clear that it is not a physical thing. It is part of human experience but not a tactile one. As such, to attempt to find the thing-in-itself becomes difficult. Farrell's "symbolic" places provide a feeling for what a community is, but they also illustrate the difficulty in defining it. As a result, he talks about the clear boundaries of a community: a functional definition. It remains, then, to find out what the boundaries are. Hiskes begins a discussion of the functional definition of community when he states:

The question of whether community is normative or descriptive concept raises a third dispute among the four theories of community.³ In its most reduced form, community is generally conceived of as a relationship involving individual persons marked by sharing or at least by the holding in common of something by all members. What is it that is shared or held in common in the communal relation? Several alternatives are offered by these four theorists: common interests, geographic location, a common heritage or a set of concepts that interpret the world, race or culture, and finally commonly held moral beliefs and attitudes (p. 23).

Hiskes, then, suggests that there are at least four different ways to define the boundaries of a community: common interests, common location, common heritage, or common beliefs. The key to all of these delineations is, of course, commonality. That would seem to be the basic characteristic of community—there must be something in common. The boundaries, for each individual, are then divided into their physical situation, their cognitive interests and their own past. The physical situation divides itself into changeable and relatively unchanging characteristics. The changeable characteristics include the location of the individual. If they want to leave the community of Minneapolis or of Manhattan they can move. On the other hand, if the individual wants to leave a community based on practically immutable characteristics (like skin color) that is more difficult. If, for example a person wanted to avoid being considered a member of an ethnic community,

he/she could achieve psychological distance-by proclaiming their separation-but others may still attempt to place them within that community.

The cognitive interests are divided into motivations and actions. Beliefs are not unlike motives. If people exhibit common motives then they may exist in a community bound together on the basis of similar beliefs.

Interests, however, are the activities themselves. People may be in a community based on interests, for example, but have extremely different reasons for sharing that interest.

The past of the individual is controlling in terms of their individual and group experiences. What a person's lineage was determines their potential to participate in a community based on heritage. People's individual experiences help define what they believe and what they are interested in.

The important element in each of these different boundaries is that they need not all be the boundaries for a specific community. A community may be bound by any one concept or combination of concepts.

"Community" is a symbol for relationships in which the experiences of social solidarity, mutual openness of character, and common search for truth are dominant. All three of these experiences may be present, but more commonly only one or two will be. In combination they will determine the type of community, but the presence of any one will allow us to symbolize the relationship using the concept (Cochran p. 37).

These boundaries then, serve as a functional definition of community. While it must be remembered that the term is still quite elusive, this functional definition should serve to minimize the confusion. What is important for the purposes of this study is that community is based on some combination of a people's beliefs, experiences, and understanding of situations. The beliefs, experiences, and understandings must be derived from and framed by some context to be meaningful. The process of contextualization involves the communal discourse and the discourse about communities. It is now time to ask what form communal communication takes in the various settings where we might find it. To that end, I have chosen to examine several texts that deal with the relationship between computer interaction and community in the hopes of further clarifying the boundary conditions for the word "community."

A further note, I have chosen to look only at those works that are opposed to the depiction of online activities as "communities." The reason is simple. The previous discussion has, I hope, indicated that most people are willing to use the term community in a number of ways and that they, in those uses, are often not clear about what it is that they mean. One might assert (in an overly simple example) that a shirt is red without having to do much discussion about what it means to be red. On the other hand, if a shirt is arguably red and one hopes to prove that it is not red, that arguer would be far more inclined to draw boundary conditions.

The discussion of community and computer interaction should begin, I suppose with Clifford Stoll. His book Silicon Snake Oil received a fair amount of attention in the popular press and he is an author familiar with computer based interactions. In an essay published in the Minutes of the Lead Pencil Society, Stoll

warned the readers to

discount the fawning techno-burble about virtual communities. Computers and networks isolate us from one another. A network chat line is a limp substitute for meeting friends over coffee. No interactive multimedia display comes close to the excitement of a live concert. And who'd prefer cybersex to the real thing? While the Internet beckons brightly, seductively flashing an icon of knowledge-as-power, this nonplace lures us to surrender our time on earth. A poor substitute it is, this virtual reality where frustration is legion and where--in the holy names of Education and Progress--important aspects of human interaction are relentlessly devalued (59).

This paragraph offers several possible distinctions. Initially, computer interaction isolates so presumably communities encourage closeness. Second, computer interaction is "limp." Presumably this claim means that computer based discussions lack some vitality or meaning that exists in non-computer based discussion. Communities, therefore must be places where that vitality exists. Finally, Stoll returns to the idea of communities as being physical. The interactions facilitated by computer technology occur in some "nonplace," so communities must be places (I presume in the physical sense).

Initially, computer interaction increases separateness rather than closeness. Stoll attempted to illustrate the isolation created by on-line communication through an example in Silicon Snake Oil:

Three guys are talking about the Knicks in the next room; in the kitchen, several women are buttering popcorn. One of them just called my name. But I don't care.

Fingers on the keyboard, I'm bathed in the cold glow of my cathode-ray tube, answering e-mail.

While one guy's checking the sky through binoculars, and another's stuffing himself with popcorn,

I'm tapping out a letter to a stranger across the continent. My attention's directed to the Internet (1).

Paradoxically, of course, the Internet has also connected Stoll with that "stranger" across the continent. The connection may be different, but that is another matter. The fact that Stoll felt compelled to let us know it was a stranger (an other) rather than a friend is interesting, but that statement documents his relationship to the other person more than it does the nature of on-line relationships. Similarly, Amy Wu, writing in the Minutes of the Lead Pencil Society, noted that many [Internet addicts] have lost friends and a social life which includes going out to the movies or out for pizza. Some haven't talked on the phone or written a letter for a year@ (94). What if the person Stoll had been responding to was his daughter or best friend from high school? What if I replaced the inserted "Internet addicts" with debate team members or nuclear engineering students? Would their impression of the situation have changed? Without being able to know the answers to those questions, the nature of the difference seems more likely to be found in the discussion of another point. The fact remains that some addition of connections may require the lessening of others-a point made, frequently in discussions of interpersonal communication, for example. Can you imagine some community (anything that you currently take as worthy of the term) which would not require of you at least a modicum of time and effort-time and effort that you might otherwise spend in the company of others (in,

perhaps, a different community)? There may be some discussion of degree here, but that has not been undertaken. Frankly, I worry that our understanding of community might be shaped only as a reflection against those labeled as "addicts" of one form or another.

The difference in the connectedness or the separateness as expressed in these works, then, must come in the discussion of the next two questions: do computer based interactions lack something that face to face interactions (or other "communal" encounters) offer to enhance communities and does the lack of physical space make a difference in the interactions that might diminish our sense of community?

What does computer based communication lack? One answer that is frequently offered is time for reflection. Stoll notes that he was "starting to think that e-mail destroys reflection at both ends of the communication channel. With the pressure to compose a letter on the fly, I don't reread my words and tailor my arguments" (168). In and of itself, however, this lack of reflection seems dubious. In real time, face to face encounters, how much time is spent reflecting? Are high self monitoring people more inclined to be members of a community than low self monitors? Of course, Stoll and others might argue that it is the combination of face to face encounters and the lack of time to reflect that combine to restrict on-line communication from developing communities. There may be something to that argument, but it is not fully developed here. I would be surprised if any one communication event led to the development of community or much communal feeling--the reflection occurs not only in the act, but also in between acts. Stoll admitted that he had, sent off plenty of e-mail "that he later regretted" (168). I hope that he communicated that regret with the others involved, because it is in the continued interaction that a sense of commonality might be built--even if the initial encounters were less than perfect.

The final concern about computer based interactions and community boils down to a word: real. The computer based interactions are somehow unreal, less tangible than face to face encounters or mail that can be torn "open, its flap gummed with the sender's tongue; withdrawing that piece of paper, redolent of the sender's perfume or hand soap or house odor" (Marvel. 72). Mark Slouka, for example, worried that the "digital highway would complete the process [started by the interstate highway system], displacing the physical world altogether--abstracting travel to communication, and physical space to a metaphor" (94). This concern, it seems to me, is at the heart of all the others expressed in this paper. Because the connections enabled through the computer are "unreal," they are isolating us from real friends and real interactions in real pizza parlors. The claim made here is quite tempting. Surely the basis for true and powerful communities must be built on a more solid foundation than the creative imaginings of someone connected through keyboard and phone lines to a network of others somewhere physically distant. Tying the three points together, Stoll noted that

Computer networks isolate us from one another, rather than bring us together. We need only deal with one side of an individual over the net. And if we don't like what we see, we just pull the plug. Or flame them. There's no need to tolerate the imperfections of real people. . . .

By logging on to the networks, we lose the ability to enter into spontaneous interactions with real

people (58).

The real world has a particular kind of richness, then, that allows communities to form in physical areas and prevents the "unreal" world of computer interaction from being meaningful. The theme of toleration of real people is a constant theme, in this argument. M. Kadi argued that on-line, "people will only meet people who are interested in the same topics in the same folders (I presume that Kadi is familiar with America On Line and may be using that model as the model for all on-line interaction). Rarely does anyone venture into a random folder just to see what others (the Other?) are talking about" (183).

This claim about the lack of toleration seems empty to me. Many of the real physical regions in which these authors might locate "community" lack diversity-and the toleration that presumptively comes with it. Further, we have always had the choice to accept some people and reject others. Some of the people I have interacted with throughout the years have become friends, some acquaintances, and others have disappeared from my world entirely. I made at least some of those choices, much as I might make choices about the people I interact with electronically.

An interesting addition to the argument about reality is the seductiveness of unreality. While lamenting that no one can truly receive a hug on-line, many of the authors quoted here seem to believe that others will be ensnared by the lure of technology or the promise of escape. Such a concern about the seductiveness of on-line communication led to a confusing misreading by Stoll of an example in his book. He wrote:

To see how birds learn songs, he raised white-crowned sparrows. When they left the nest, Dr. Baptista placed single fledglings in a special cage where they could see and hear an Asian strawberry finch. The young birds could also hear several dialects of their own sparrow songs in the same room, but they couldn't see those sparrows.

The fledgling sparrows didn't learn their own songs. Instead they matured, singing the songs of the Asian finches with whom they socially interacted. And later, as parents, these sparrows taught their young to sing Chinese songs, too. Sparrows learn from living teachers not machines.

In the same way, the isolation of computers and online networks causes us to sing others' songs. Children, raised with less social interaction, adopt the ways of the first people they come in close contact with. It encourages a divorce from parental values and the dominance of peer culture. Kids that interact with computers rather than their parents miss out on the most important part of growing: being close to their families (59).

Now, Stoll, it would seem, changes his mind in from one paragraph to the next. At one point, we cannot learn from machines. At the next, we can--and that learning can overpower the learning that takes place in the diminished real world. Earlier in the book, we could not have close contact with others on-line (the strangers), but now children are capable of such close contact through the machine that they learn others songs rather than their own.

I began this paper with the hope that the discussions of communities on-line might somehow illuminate our understanding of communities generally. Rather, I think it has illustrated with greater clarity the care that we

must take in talking about community. I am reminded of Saul Alinsky's admonition to talk plainly. When we want to use powerful language, we should to capture the power of the words we have chosen. "Community" is such a powerful word. It contains our hopes and desires and our fears. My communities are not the same as yours and it may be natural to see yours as a threat to mine (what if everyone joins yours?) Unfortunately, the power of "community" means that its meaning can be swallowed up by the connotations it carries. The authors quoted here found on-line communities unfulfilling, threatening, or otherwise bad. Rather than draw the sharp distinctions I had hoped for, they resorted to somewhat vague declarations about life on-line.

In the end, then, I am left with Nancy's statement that community resists disappearing. Perhaps we know too much of community to talk meaningfully of it. At any rate, the claims made to date about the Internet and community run the risk of committing the fallacy of extension--accusing on-line communities of not being what they were never meant to be or the end up marking the boundaries so small (physical location, not limiting on other relationships, authentic interactions that take time for consideration) that no group of people could possibly meet them. In the future, perhaps authors writing about potential communities in different contexts (like the Internet) would do well to hold up examples of communities that would meet all of their requirements and compare real groups of people on-line to those examples (rather than picking isolated examples and hoping to weave a coherent whole out of them).

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- 1 The meaning of the word compear could not be determined exactly. Later in this book, however, the author uses compearance (comparution) which means court appearance. For this reason, it is assumed that compear means to appear for judgement or comparison and contrast.
- 2 I am unable to determine the exact meaning of "pearance." I have surmised that since compear is used to denote appear for comparison, pearance may mean introspection or inward appearance.
- 3 The four theories are those of Ferdinand Toennies' "Organic Community", Robert McIver's "Community of Public Interest", Raymond Plant's "Community of Private Interest," and anarchistic thinkers.