

COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY IN CYBERSPACE: AN INTRODUCTION TO KEY THEMES AND ISSUES

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This paper argues that any comprehensive analysis of the meanings of community and identity at the start of the 21st century must include a consideration of the development, current significance, potential and associated risks of what have been called “computer mediated communication” (CMC), “cybercommunities” and “cyberidentities”. The paper comprises an attempt to locate the study of such phenomena within the tradition of the sociological study of community, followed by a brief consideration of contested accounts of their potential and risk. Consideration is then given to the related issue of self and identity within virtual community and debates surrounding the potential for positive liberation or negative licence, deviance and criminality. The paper closes with some initial conclusions on the state and potential of the sociological study of this social phenomenon.

Changing Conceptions of Community: the possibility of “cybercommunity”

Sociological conceptions of community have, classically, rested on two key ideas, the first of which, going back to Tönnies, is the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. The former, seen as reflecting “a set of voluntary, social and reciprocal relations that are bound together by an immutable “we-feeling” (Foster 1997, 25), is associated more closely with conceptions of community, in contrast to the latter, which is seen as a more impersonal, utilitarian or instrumental association of people. Secondly, as Jones (1998, 15) asserts, conventional definitions of community are seen as centering unproblematically on an idea of place—“a “where” that social scientists can observe, visit, stay, go, engage in participant observation”. Thus the history of the study of community has a view of space as less something that is *socially produced*, but more that which *itself produces* social relations. This has led sociological studies of community to be traditionally rooted in conceptions such as territory. However, more recently it has been argued that “...the Internet is a medium with great consequences for social and economic life” (Jones 1999, xii), playing as it has a key role in facilitating the alleged transformation of society to a period of late modernity (Dodge, Kitchin 2001). The Internet can be seen as affording the technological infrastructure, within which CMC takes place, thereby constituting a location freed of conventional notions of time and space—

“cyberspace”. Moreover, more people’s lives within contemporary society are being influenced by communities that do not rest upon physical proximity. Sociological interest in the consequences for community of such rapid social and technological change has brought about a recognition that, “Through these turbulent and often conflictual processes of transformation, we are seeing the dislocation and relocation of senses of belonging and community” (Robins 1995, 146). As a consequence, studies of community increasingly recognise that space and location are less important since communities do not have to be, and increasingly are not, densely knit, solidaristic groups living in close proximity. Rather, the recognition that communities may be better thought of as social networks represents nothing less than a “conceptual revolution” (Wellman, Gulia 1999) in their study. When this is combined with Anderson’s (1983, 6) notion of the “imagined community”, which distinguishes communities “not by their falsity or genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined”, it becomes possible to see that a space may have opened for virtual community or “cybercommunity”.

The root of the idea of virtual community is to be found in the recognition that the term “community” seemed appropriate to define those new social groupings that began to emerge as a result of on-line interaction. The “classic” definition of virtual community has been offered by Rheingold (1993, 5) as

the social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.

The key claim for CMC and the resultant virtual communities is that they will firstly, “lead us toward a new community; global, local and everything in between” (Jones 1998, 8); and secondly, release us from the ties of everyday life and existence (Poster 1995). At its greatest, it is claimed that the potential of CMC extends to creating new opportunities for education, learning and participatory democracy, in addition to encouraging the creation of counter cultures on a scale hitherto unknown (Jones 1998). The community creating potential of CMC’s “techno-sociality” is seen as providing “the basis for developing new and compensatory forms of community and conviviality” (Robins 1995, 147). These, minimally, constitute an effective mode of adjustment to what are seen as increasingly problematic conditions within contemporary society while, optimally, they may serve to make good the decay and damage suffered by modern democratic community life. Given both that locations in which people gather for conviviality are essential features of social life, and that many of the “real world” examples of these have been eroded, virtual communities may be seen as potential “loci for a reinvigorated informal public sphere” (Foster 1997, 32).

However, not only is electronic communication seen as affording both some return of conviviality to social life and some revitalisation of the public sphere, but the virtual communities created, based as they are on shared interests rather than accidental incidences of geographical or social location, may serve to transcend old social divisions. The “liberating technology” of the Internet allows on-line interaction, which is, if desired, unencumbered by the social baggage of gender, age, ethnicity or class. In the absence of such given social cues, or with self-defined cues,

new directions for interaction may open up, which may remain unlikely in face-to-face circumstances. The resulting virtual communities may be seen as

exciting new forms of community which liberate the individual from the social constraints of embodied identity and from the restrictions of geographically embodied space; which equalise through the removal of embodied hierarchical structures; and which promote a sense of connectedness (or fraternity) among interactive participants. They are therefore posited as the epitome of postmodern community within which multiplicity of self is enhanced and difference proliferates uninhibited by external social structures (Willson 2000, 647).

Thus, by the most optimistic reading, virtual communities may provide

a space and form for a new experience of community [which is] multiple, liberating, equalising and ... providing a richer experience of togetherness (ibid., 655).

Other arguments, however, have it that the connectivity of cybercommunity is essentially a sham. Doubts have been raised as to whether, when interacting on-line, people more accurately experience some kind of simulacrum of community rather than the "real thing". Foster (1997, 32), in noting the inevitability of this, asserts that

the factors that make CMC so attractive, its ability to play with identity, anonymity and the distantiating of time and space, are those that preclude the necessary ascendancy of *Gemeinschaft* over *Gesellschaft* in these conceptual spaces.

Thus, rather than fostering a true sense of *Gemeinschaft*, CMC may allow people to engage in what is better seen as self absorbed interaction, in which the other merely exists as instrumental in *my* self becoming. The beauty and attraction of the Internet, of course, is that it offers seemingly unlimited numbers of those who may (consciously or otherwise) fulfil this role for ego. This limited scope for interpersonal communication on-line has been highlighted by Willson (2000, 651), who asks whether "'community' can be sufficiently defined by the machinations of thin/emptied out selves interacting via text through cyberspace." In providing a diverse list of possible ways of understanding virtual community, Wilbur (2000, 50) offers this damning reading of it:

Virtual community is the illusion of a community where there are no real people and no real communities. It is a term used by idealistic technophiles who fail to understand that the authentic cannot be engendered through technological means.

Even if the community-enhancing nature of CMC is accepted, this may be seen as essentially conservative in its social effects. For the Internet, rather than seeking to promote new dimensions of community existence, in reality seeks to resurrect a fundamental sense of family, or ethos of the village, where social life was rooted in a restrictive unity, unanimity and/or mutualism. Thus cybercommunities are essentially backward looking, such that "solidarity in cyberspace seems to be a matter of extending the security of small town *Gemeinschaft* to the transnational scale of the global village" (Robins 1995, 150). Virtual communities may, therefore, be seen as having something in common with Disneyworld—in that both seek "the preservation through simulation of the old forms of solidarity and community. In the end, not an alternative society, but an alternative to society" (ibid.). The affinity

between virtual technologies and a communitarian spirit, which seeks social fusion, may be identified in cyberspace's tendency to suspend "real" selves and encourage identification and symmetry in its communities. As a consequence, techno communities may be seen as "fundamentally an anti-political ideal" (Robins 1995, 151), in that they represent a deliberate departure from the tensions and conflicts of "real" social life.

This inability of technology to generate an authentic sense of community may derive from the instant nature of such communication, which "creates a sense of intimacy without the emotional investment that leads to friendships" (Wellmann, Gulia 1999, 179). It could be argued, however, that such a critical view of virtual community rests upon a fundamentally romanticised, mythical pastoral conception of off-line communities, when in reality these are themselves increasingly geographically dispersed and reliant for their upkeep on various media of telecommunications. Moreover the idealised image of off-line communities may extend to conceptions of the face-to-face interaction that takes place. A strong line in dramaturgical research (Goffman 1974) would suggest that social interaction is not that of "whole people", but of role-playing individuals, making use of appropriate "props" in "front stage" performances for others. There may be much, therefore, in the argument that

the limited evidence available suggests that the relationships people develop and maintain in cyberspace are much like most of the ones they develop in their real life communities: intermittent, specialised and varying in strength (Wellmann, Gulia 1999, 186).

However, it is interesting to note the possibility that the root of the "we-" feeling of on-line communities may be shared interests rather than the shared social characteristics—such as gender and socio-economic status—which are arguably more typical of off-line communities. This leads the argument to consider the inclusive and essentially participative democratic claims made for cybercommunities. These are questionable, as "Both inclusive and exclusive forces are manifest in the design and implementation of new convergent networks such as the internet". Far from liberating people from such social cleavages as class and gender, the merging pattern of communication "is creating new processes of social stratification that are only beginning to be understood" (Mansell, Steinmueller 2002, 39). Key groupings within such a stratified order may well be the information rich and the information poor, the latter comprising people who are either unwilling or unable to make use of new technology. The information poverty of such people may well correlate with material poverty. A major criticism of research into cybercommunities is that it fails to examine the distribution of the ability and wherewithal to create, maintain and control virtual space. An extension of research into such areas would open up an analysis of authority, dominance, submission, resistance and rebellion in cyberspace. As Jones (1998, 20) notes, "Just because the spaces with which we are now concerned are electronic, there is not a guarantee that they are democratic, egalitarian or accessible." The anti-democratic potential of on-line communication may cause people to become

trapped and ensnared in a “net” that predominantly offers new opportunities for surveillance and social control [such that] networks will disproportionately increase the strength of existing concentrations of power (Kollock, Smith 1999, 4).

Moreover, it is not merely a question of structural issues: in their on-line behaviour in cyberspace people demonstrate tendencies toward social conservatism. Great lengths are taken to recreate such social cleavages as gender on-line, to such an extent that

gender is one characteristic of our embodied lives that is a central feature in interaction throughout the internet, [often] in a more limited and stereotypical manner than exists in embodied interaction (ibid., 12).

Such “hypergendering” has the consequence that “a world without constraints has led to a greater homogeneity rather than new forms of identity” (ibid.).

It has also been argued that, far from heralding a new era of rich interpersonal interaction, CMC may well facilitate the creation of “cyberaddicts”, who distance themselves from “real-life” community with its full range of forms of person-to-person contact. Undoubtedly there are those who spend a great deal of time in CMC, but it is argued that community involvement and interaction is not a “zero sum game”. Rather than more time spent in on-line communication meaning less time spent in other community involvement, in fact the one may facilitate the other (Preece 2000). Moreover, the rigidity of the distinction between on- and off-line communities and interaction has been challenged, with the argument that most communities now combine face-to-face communication with telecommunication. A medium such as the telephone, now a taken-for-granted means of staying in touch in the developed economies, was “as recently as the 1940s [seen] as an exotic, depersonalised form of communication” (Wellmann, Gulia 1999, 182). One need only think of age-related variations in the perceived value and use of mobile phones to recognise that such change is ongoing. Indeed, internet communication is fast coming to “be seen much as telephone contact is now and letter writing was in Jane Austen’s time: a reasonable way to maintain strong and weak ties between people who are not in a position to have a face to face encounter at the moment” (ibid.).

Selfhood and Identity in Cyberspace

Among the most crucial issues to explore in any introductory consideration of cyberspace and cybercommunity are the related meanings of selfhood and identity. If it is taken that “Human social life is unimaginable without some means of knowing who others are and some sense of who we are” (Jenkins 1996, 5), then it follows that conceptions of identity and self are crucial to any form of social interaction. On-line interaction may be seen as having a somewhat ambivalent relationship to social identity, because of its ability to take place without many of the cues and signs which are an integral part of presenting and recognising identity in off-line interaction. Arguably, therefore, the development and sheer spread of on line interaction has allowed for the emergence of the “virtual self”, whose contact with others and the world is via electronic means (Agger 2004). Indeed the Internet may be seen as “the

slate upon which we can write and rewrite our personalities in a perpetual act of self-creation" (Jewkes, Sharp 2003, 2-3). Such a virtual self may, therefore, emerge from the individual's exploration of, experimentation with and (re)construction of her/his sense of self (Turkle 1995). While the poverty of signals may make certain kinds of interaction more difficult, it also provides the room to "play with one's identity" (Kollock, Smith 1999, 9).

It could be, then, that virtual communities are more likely to be characterised by the fluidity of identity among their members. As Wilbur (2000, 12) notes, "The persona that appears in cyberspace is potentially more fluid than those we assume in other aspects of our lives, in part because we can consciously shape it". This conscious shaping becomes possible not least as a result of our liberation from what might be described as our corporeal selves, those "fixed" aspects of identity that are enshrined in the body. In the physical world of off-line interaction, it is the body which offers definition to self and identity and, depending on one's view, either stability and unity or constraint and limit. In virtual worlds, constructed from information rather than physical matter, people may enjoy liberation from the constraints of the body and engage in virtual identity play. Turkle (1995), for example, notes the sense of self liberation that derives from the possibility that self identity may be created without necessary reference to those conventional social markers of age, gender, class and (dis)ability. Thus

many analyses have focused on how anonymous users can switch genders, appearances, sexual orientation, and countless other usually integral aspects of the public self as well as take on multiple identities (Baym 1998, 54).

This in turn raises two crucial issues for this analysis; first the extent to which the disembodied nature of such on-line identity construction may allow for the development of cyberselves, which offer individuals the opportunity to restrict access to, or even redefine what they may think of as stigmatised aspects of identity. Second, the extent to which such liberation may turn into licence to engage in egotistical, instrumental, abusive or even criminal activity, by "facilitating the establishment of identities that are fantastic, fraudulent, exploitative or criminal" (Jewkes, Sharp 2003, 3).

Taking the liberatory potential of the cyberself, this may be taken as merely a further development of the ongoing fragmentation of identity, which some argue is occurring in late-modernity. Postmodernist writers claim that such anonymity of identity within virtual communities is precisely what enables multiple identity construction and raises the somewhat utopian idea of the ability to play with identity and thereby promote new forms and channels of communication. As Baym notes, it is the *anonymity* which appeals to many, not, it is argued, because of any fear of the consequences of disclosure, but because "anonymity is part of the magic" (Baym 1998, 55). Donath (1999) makes the useful distinction between anonymous and pseudonymous identity. The latter may include much associated information of a contextual nature about the identity holder. Thus, while the web identity may bear little direct relationship to the "real world" originator, it may be closely linked to a well known "virtual person". The former, anonymous identity has no link to known figures, whether in the "real" or "virtual" worlds. However, both raise significant

concerns about identity concealment, trustworthiness and ultimately social control. Anonymity of identity in web-based interaction may be advocated for its protection of individual privacy from unwanted and unwarranted surveillance. On the other hand, untraceable virtual identities may serve as an invitation for criminal and fraudulent behaviour, or that which may endanger others. At its extreme, it could be argued that a community of perfectly anonymous persons is an oxymoron. In the less extreme case, the dangers of a dissolution or fragmentation of subject/identity, combined with the transient and immediate nature of on-line communication, may erode significantly the sense of responsibility toward others that is surely a characteristic of community (Willson 2000).

Here we turn to the second of the two key issues raised above: namely, that “cyberspace opens up infinitely new possibilities to the deviant imagination” (Jewkes, Sharp 2003, 2). The defining qualities of internet communication—its anonymity, its disembodiment, its speed and its reach—are seen to encourage a sense of risk-taking, which may be reflected in patterns of interaction and self-identity management. In turn, such interaction is seen as mirroring the contemporary *zeitgeist*, in which life is defined by its spectacle, narcissism and qualities as performance (ibid.). Thus, it seems that CMC may facilitate criminal and dubious practices such as theft, fraud, child pornography, prostitution, stalking, harassment, human trafficking, hacking and “grooming” (especially of children by paedophiles) (Jewkes 2003). One of the most pressing issues concerning the regulation and monitoring of CMC is that, if social control is seen as at least in part contingent on the ability of the community to identify individual people and, thereby, hold them responsible for their actions, then this may well have an impact on the internal organisation, structure and even continued existence of virtual communities. For example, last year Microsoft closed down its chatrooms, by then used by 1.2 million people, “amid growing concerns they are being used by paedophiles to find child victims” (Carter 2003). Such policy decisions, arguably reflecting the emergence of a “moral panic” over chat rooms, have met with some criticism. As Dave Birch (2003) argues:

Chat rooms are useful, interesting and fun: turning them off (or, in fact, driving them underground) does not solve the problem. Banning them is pointless and counterproductive, penalising the majority of responsible users (e.g., my wife and me) while making them even more attractive to those at risk (e.g., teenagers). The problem isn't the chat rooms, but that no one knows who is in them: it is a problem of identity.

In what appears to be a less drastic solution, some communities have seen a “trade-off” of some of the liberating aspects of anonymity outlined above in exchange for means of accountability. CMC and virtual communities are often held up as offering new horizons for democratic structure and practice, for example by allowing “each individual user an equal voice, or at least an equal opportunity to speak” (Foster 1996, 23). On the other hand, it is becoming increasingly evident that “cyberspace is often a domain of vast power imbalances”, in which the “public” nature of punishment—typically the humiliation and ostracism of wrongdoers—marks “a return to the medieval in terms of the technology of punishment” (Kollock, Smith 1999, 13-15). It seems that cybercommunities have a long way to go in the balancing

of privacy with appropriate social control and participative democracy with due attention to the unequal distribution of power.

Identity and community in cyberspace: initial conclusions

This paper has attempted to discuss the meaning and significance of virtual communities and the related issue of self and identity in cyberspace. However, while there may be clear differences between *on-* and *off-*line communities, arguably an essentialist distinction is not sustainable. First, there are clearly great variations among the communities, which would fall into each category and second, there are key characteristics that are shared across both categories. For example, media of telecommunication are increasingly significant in off-line community interaction and as the technology of videophones and webcams develops and becomes more widely utilized, the distinctiveness of “face to face” interaction may be eroded. This does not mean to say that cybercommunity is not worthy of significant attention in key respects.

The very nature of cybercommunity still seems to be ambiguous. More longitudinal studies are needed in order to evaluate the claim that this contemporary form of social organisation may encourage heterogeneity, social innovation and political empowerment. Indeed, the issue of the distribution and exercise of control over both the world-wide-web itself and the creation of its constituent communities is at best unclear. As regards individual, community, group or social control within cybercommunities, the key issue seems to be the need to find ways to balance group and individual privacy and freedom against the possible requirement to protect others from the consequences of fraudulent and/or criminal behaviour. There is little evidence at present that successful strategies have been developed for the effective management of the line between little or no control and either a return to “name and shame” medieval styles of punishment and sanction or a total shut down of such communities.

Finally, the ease of access to the Internet and its many millions of participants, and the possibility to interact in a wholly anonymous and possibly untraceable guise, suggest that the creation and management of self and identity in cyberspace warrants more attention. Of course, the creation, maintenance and modification of identities both on- and off-line typically involve elements of artifice. The “identity play” of cyberidentity and conventional face-to-face interaction’s involvement of props, acts and role-playing performances in one sense suggest that both may be thought of as sharing a characteristic “unreality” or “artificiality”. However, a key issue seems to be the distinction between representing *self as is* (that is, expressing “intent to be”) and expressing *self as can be*: the expression of “intent to perform”. This raises issues concerning “real” and “unreal” identity; “honest” and “dishonest” identity and “authentic” and “inauthentic” identity and the extent to which the scope for deception, concealment and fraud are greater with cyberidentity. One thing is clear: more cyberethnographic research into virtual communities is badly needed. The particular “baggage” of methodological issues involved in such a project is a matter for another paper.

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