

## Chapter 99

# Virtual Communities as Subaltern Public Spheres: A Theoretical Development and an Application to the Chinese Internet

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this work is to develop a theoretical framework to examine virtual community participation using the concept of subaltern public spheres. The theory of subaltern public spheres directs attention to the internal dynamics and external interaction of virtual communities. Internal dynamics first refers to the inclusiveness of participation by looking at the access to virtual communities and the profiles of their participants. The nature of participation, as another aspect of internal dynamics, is estimated through examining the styles of the discourses and the types of participatory acts. The external interaction becomes another major focus of this theoretical framework and urges researchers to study how virtual communities interact with government apparatuses, commercial entities, the dominant public sphere, and other subaltern public spheres through discursive engagement and other means. The theoretical framework is applied to analyze a case of Chinese online public spheres to illustrate the framework's utility.*

### INTRODUCTION

Since the term *virtual community* was forged by Howard Rheingold (Rheingold, 1993), technologies have evolved rapidly (e.g., from Usenet to e-mail lists to Web 2.0) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become a common component of our everyday lives. The inquiry into the virtual community has moved from the existence question (i.e., whether communities

are able to exist virtually) to a range of research interests, including the psychological, social, political, and cultural dimensions of these mediated gatherings. This chapter centers on the political aspect of virtual communities and examines the democratic potential of the Internet through the lens of the public sphere. The initial efforts to study virtual communities often focused on the social relations formed in these mediated spaces and the psychological well-being resulting from

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participation in such spaces. Many studies also concerned one particular virtual community and how it fostered the formation of a subculture identity or a marginalized group. This chapter, in contrast, emphasizes the political dimension of virtual communities, which is the mechanism of representing the community's interest to the larger society. The Habermasian public sphere as a theoretical framework has been applied to evaluate the democratic potential of the Internet (Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002; Poster, 1995). However, the diverse and fragmented cyberspace seems to indicate a sphere that is far from universal and integrated. I proposed to take the criticism of the Habermasian public sphere seriously when examining online spaces (Zhang, 2006). This chapter presents the critique in detail and lays out a framework that follows the theory of subaltern public spheres. The usefulness of this theoretical approach is tested against an empirical case of the Chinese Internet.

## **BACKGROUND**

The metaphor of community has caught the imagination of academics since the early age of Internet research in the 1980s. A famous debate in the CMC field was whether CMC is able to support communities as face-to-face (F2F) interactions do. The cues-filtered-out perspective claims that since CMC lacks nonverbal cues, it is less personal or socioemotional than F2F interaction, and therefore less capable of supporting communities (Rice & Love, 1987; Sproull & Kiesler 1986; DeSanctis & Gallupe 1987; Spears & Lea, 1992). On the other hand, researchers claim that CMC is able to foster the feeling of relational development over time (Walther, 1992), and communicators can successfully achieve collective goals if they are work-oriented (Walther & Burgoon, 1990). The latter camp suggests that virtual communities are probable. Now it seems clear that the debate on the superiority/inferiority of CMC vs. F2F is

a false comparison. CMC does not compete with F2F for the same kind of communities. Rather, CMC and F2F are integrated to build new types of communities that emerge out of the postmodern conditions of social lives.

The concept of community has gone through significant changes through history and across social contexts. According to Bell and Newby (1976), the idea of community first appeared in preindustrial societies. Communities in this period bore characteristics such as rural, homogenous, and densely knitted (Wellman, 1999). These communities had a local economic basis and a hierarchical power system (Bell & Newby, 1976). In agricultural societies, ownership of land was the crucial resource for the possession of power; thus, people were linked to the local form of territoriality. Power was exercised personally by the landowning elites via F2F interaction. Communities emphasized a common adherence to territory and solidarity of place, to both the elites and the subordinates.

The idea of community encountered its first critical challenge when societies were changed by the Industrial Revolution. When societies became unstable, dispersed, and heterogeneous, the rural community in the agricultural era broke down, and so did the local and personalized modes of control (Bell & Newby, 1976). This breakdown was not the end of community, however. Communities still existed in neighborhoods and operated as a method of social integration. Neighborhood communities retain three features of rural communities: locale, common ties, and social interaction (Bernard, 1973).

Researchers who are interested in modern communities suggest that we should understand communities as networks. Without presuming that a community is confined to a local area, social network analysis focuses on social relations and social structures (Wellman, 1999). This approach frees the conceptualization of community from a preoccupation with solidarity and neighborhood, and accommodates social changes. Social network

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