Virtual Communities

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of "virtual communities" (VC) made its appearance in the academic debate starting from the mid Nineties[1]; the origin of the phenomenon, however, dates back to at least thirty years earlier, when a few groups of researchers started to carry out the first experiments on the *net* connection nodes. VC are quite varied: group members may *meet* by electronic means in some Internet spaces, or can exchange messages without ever experiencing actual moments of real-time *conversation*. The value of expression "virtual community" does not lie in its stating an unambiguous concept, but in its referring to a vast universe of meanings and values, where mailing lists, forums, e-groups may be found, as well as MUD (Multi User Dungeons or Multi User Domains), MOO (MUD Object Oriented) and the 3D worlds, environments describing and representing different inter-subjective relations.

Today in the Web there are several forms of *communities* which are grouped on the basis of the type of communication they activate (synchronous and asynchronous) and the type of interface (text-only or graphic version).

In order to understand how these VC work we should briefly mention here their development. We should consider the historical and social point of view, by observing the cultural milieu of the early communities as pertinent. At different level, we may trace back both the *feeling of belonging*, typical of the "community[2]," as well as the setting up of social regimes ascribable to community life, with related assignment of roles.

BACKGROUND

From Community to Virtual Community

The concept of "community" became central in the late 19th century thanks to Ferdinand Tönnies' work (1887) in terms of the well-known *Gemeinschaft-Gesellshaft* dichotomy. In essence, we owe to him the first definition of "community" in the modern age. Tönnies countered it with "society," thus highlighting qualities such as trust and safety being engendered among its members. The "community" represented the *positive* cohesion of the social, and compared with the formation of the "mass," seen *negatively* as the grouping of individuals characterised by the lack of stable ties.

Even today the notion of community still exercises a great evocative power, automatically leading to a series of traditional values acquired in faraway times. In many instances this past is described as the moment when human relations were better functioning than today's.

The classic definition of community is linked to its geographic location. This element cannot be applied with respect to VC in the Internet: the "housing" space, when it is there, resides in a server and may be reached by the group members via the Net connection. A full-fledged physical space is lacking, what does instead exist and persist is the *feeling of the place.* A meeting place exists, with different qualities from those of concrete environments, and the members of these aggregations perceive and experience it as a common space.

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In accordance with Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) our intention here is to assert that electronic media have significantly changed the meaning of the physical presence, which in some circumstances is no longer needed to experience social events: «the media development has lessened the meaning of being physically present in experiencing people and events [...] *Where* one is located is increasingly disconnected from one's own experiences and knowledge. Electronic media have changed the meaning of time and space in social interaction» (Meyrowitz, 1985; Introduction).

The role of space in the definition of these aggregations is particularly relevant and should be taken into account in the study of groups or communities in the Net: this is also the *reason* why they exist. Without the possibility of having a meeting place, even if virtual, interactions among individuals would cease to exist. The most interesting element refers to the nature of the space: this is in fact a medial space, whose reality depends on the existence of the media (specifically for the Internet) and as such it cannot envisage the possibility of mediated interactions. Let us move now to briefly explore the peculiarities of VC and their history.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE COMPUTER…

The utopia of thinking about the computer as a "machine" to build "mediated communities" was born in 1968, from the vision of Joseph Licklider and Robert Taylor, an utopia that became concrete in everyday practice in a process of constantly re-inventing the medium and its meanings, thanks to its earliest users (who were also the designers of Arpanet[3]), besides the crucial influence exercised from the "bottom-up" by the earlier communities of users outside the IT universe. The project of the scholars was based on the observation of the features and potential of the Net as a tool for the *modelling of communication and interaction* (Pasquali, 2003). The two scientists had in fact focussed their attention precisely on users and their exchanges. These small communities where first of all awarded because individual efforts were "regenerating": a virtuous circle did take place between research, development of IT systems and the building of practical applications.

Starting from the Seventies, some examples of VC have been traced, which became "mythical" in the history of Internet Studies. They are specifically *CommuniTree*, *Habitat* and *The Well*. From an analytical point of view, these are the most studied aggregations of the time due to their success in terms of attendance, and represent the foundation of socialisation models anchored to the use of space, which are part of the interpretation frameworks used and adopted to explain the functioning of today's communities.

Just for a short historical overview, let us recall here that during the Seventies and Eighties the large scale dissemination of the *personal computer* took place together with an earlier significant expansion of the Internet, which on the one hand impacted on the changes of the general layout of the media system, and on the other hand established new recreational-play modes. In particular three points should be taken into account in the study of the evolution of technological media:

- The dissemination of telematic networks, built and used both as media and as communication milieus;
- The circulation of a *tactical* use of technologies, mostly linked to the counter-cultural milieu;
- The dissemination of the first computer-games.

CommuniTree, *Habitat* and *The Well* are characterised by the diverse social experiences which took place in their spaces. *CommuniTree* was one of the most representative examples of online social aggregations in the Seventies. *Habitat* was born in the 1980s and can be described as an experiment half way between virtual community and Multiplayer Games. *The Well* was originally a sort of "branching out" of a successful periodical, the Whole Earth Catalog, which later took up its own specific outlook to become the first true form of Internet-based virtual community, according to many scholars and mass media. The three examples differ in terms of functioning modes, topics being debated, and features of participating users.

The members of *CommuniTree* considered the display and the personal computer as tools for relational transformations by the way they reconfigured social interactions: "The CommuniTree Group (…) saw the BBS in McLuhanesque terms as transformative because of the ontological structure it presupposed and simultaneously created (…) and because it was another order of "extension," in McLuhan's sense, a kind of prosthesis. The BBS that the CommuniTree