

Cultural Diversity and the Digital Divide

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INTRODUCTION

We are introducing a new culture: e-culture. -Ahmed El Nazif

“Since ancient times philosophers, politicians, and social critics have debated the nature of community” (Parrish, 2002, p. 260; Bunn, 1998). “Aristotle and others have claimed that community is a broader concept, but have still kept their focus on the geographical and face-to-face nature of community” (Parrish, 2002, p. 260; Aristotle, 1991). “These views were reasonable in their time, but the advent of computer networking has caused these classic interpretations of community to lose currency” (Parrish, 2002; Cooley, 1983; Marvin, 1884).

Some (Fernback & Thompson, 1997) like Edmund Burke have focused on the intergenerational and traditional aspects of life that he believes form true communities (Burke, 1790). “Even such proponents of virtual community as Rheingold (1993), Schwartz (1994), and McClellan (1994) maintain ‘face-to-face meetings’ can be valuable in the formation of a true sense of community” (Ferguson, 1994, p. 48; Mowitt, 2001). However, with our new abilities to communicate synchronously with multiple parties over the Internet—called synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC), we have opened up entirely new possibilities for the formation of true communities (Parrish, 2002; Robins, 2000).

Daniel Filmus (2003), Minister of Education, Science, and Technology, Republic of Argentina, states, “The issue of cultural diversity is the central and most essential theme of our discussion” within cyberspace’s virtual community. In order to discuss cultural diversity within this context, the reader must first find the meanings of community—both traditional (geographically) and contemporary (virtually). Literature throughout history is reviewed for definitions, succinctness, and clarity on this particular topic of virtual community diversity.

“Although the classic discussions of community cannot be applied directly to the context of the Internet, traditional community and virtual community have many [similarities]” (Parrish, 2002, p. 261). This work is an analysis of the traditional “community” (Cooke, 1990)—geographic community (Cartesian space) and the progress toward the virtual community. “Individuals, or a functional substitute such as a computer identity, come to-

gether to pursue and realize common interests, which tend to privilege [those certain] particular interests and needs” (Schuler, 1994, p. 63; Holmes, 1997, p. 28). There are imbalances in the virtual cosmos, similar to the Cartesian plane.

“The Internet reaches only a very small portion of the inhabitants of this planet” (Samara, 2003). While analyzing these “inhabitants,” many “technical, political, and financial challenges” (Gowing, 2003) are addressed. This article also addresses the opportunities and challenges associated with “reconciling free flow of information and the need to preserve diversity in [the] digital world” (Vike-Freiberga, 2003). Finally, this article summarizes what many global leaders and scholars say about cultural diversity and the impact on the world and on the virtual community.

HISTORY

Since the dawn of humankind, community has been a central governing component of human survival. Although cultural diversity within geographical context usually infers conflict, the virtual community embraces cultural diversity to great extent. “While the focus of this work is cyberspace, it is interesting to note that the greatest technological leap towards a post-geographical context-medium occurred with the invention and subsequent proliferation of the telephone in the late 19th and early 20th centuries” (Parrish, 2002, p. 261; Aronson, 1977). “The telephone,” according to Boettinger, “[was] the first device to allow the spirit of a person expressed in his own voice to carry its message directly without transporting the body” (Boettinger, 1977, p. 205; Attali & Stourdze, 1977; Marvin, 1884).

Furthermore, the telephone “was the first technology to allow individuals” (Parrish, 2002, p. 261; Huber, 1987) “[to] move about the country and yet appear to stay in one place” (Cherry, 1997, p. 114). ARPANET was introduced in the 1970s (Licklider, Taylor, and Herbert, 1968), giving way to the Internet, cyberspace, and the theme of this article—virtual communities. Today, Licklider, one of the founding fathers of ARPANET, predicted exactly what the world is experiencing in 2004—*globalization* (Garnham, 1992; Habermas, 1992; Oldenburg, 1991; Winner, 1980).

DEFINITION OF COMMUNITY

Broadly defined, a community is a “group of people whom, by virtue of a natural need for interaction, shared goals and interests, sustain bonds of connection,” cooperation, collaboration, and “support with one another” (Parrish, 2002, p. 262; Hopper, 1991). Parrish also states, “Traditional community and virtual community both exist and arise from the same general ideals (2002, p. 262). Challenges arise when the understandings of classic traditional paradigms are applied to contemporary “understandings of community to the new virtual world” (Parrish, 2002, p. 262). To define community, it is split into two categories: traditional and virtual.

Traditional Community

Aristotle states that a community begins when a “union of those who cannot exist without each other, [for example,] male and female for the sake of procreation,” (1991, p. 179) become one. Aristotle’s work (1991) also states that families form, evolving into villages. Eventually through “increased economic relations,” states develop from these villages (Parrish, 2002, p. 262; Aristotle, 1992, p. 559). Likewise, Edmund Burke’s theory of community, “stresses the importance of tradition in the propagation of commonalities” (Burke, 1790). These “dearest domestic ties” and “family affections,” writes Burke (1790), are the basis of a healthy community that does not destroy all that came before whenever some difficulty strikes the polity (Burke, 1790; Parrish, 2002).

Transformation of Community

More recently, Ferdinand Tonnies states that *gemeinschaft* (community) is distinguished from mere *gesellschaft* (society) by its foundations in received tradition and custom (Parrish, 2002; Tonnies, 1957, 1988). Traditional community accepts these generalized principals in many different ways. For example, according to Rheingold (1993), includes Amish “barn raising” as well as Yankee “horse trading,” develops into “a kind of gift economy in which people do things for one another out of a spirit of building something” (p. 59), among and between themselves.

Another classical writer on traditional community, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, according to Parrish (2002) “focuses on the role of the state in the creation of important commonalities”. “Men living in their original [natural] state do not have sufficiently constant relationships among themselves” (Rousseau, 1987, p. 145). “Individuals coalesce into communities by subsuming their individual wills under a common, ‘unified one,’” (Rhoten, 2003) “by placing themselves and [their] power in common under the supreme direction of the general will”

(Parrish, 2002, p. 262). “As one, [they] receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole” (Rousseau, 1987, p. 145). Although many of these widely accepted traditional viewpoints of geographic community are meaningless in cyberspace, common goals and interests are an important part of any true community—traditional or “virtual” (Calem, 1992; Mills, 1959; Van Vliet & Burgers, 1987).

According to Kitchin (1998), “Virtual communities focus on personal intimacy, moral commitment, and social cohesion” at least as much as the classical interpretation of the “traditional community” (p. 86). Similar to the traditional Cartesian communities, virtual communities are also “strong, cohesive and supporting” (Kitchin, 1998, p. 87). Wilbur claims that “What is important [to communities] is a ‘holding-in-common’ of qualities, properties, identities, [and] ideas” (Wilbur, 2000, p. 48; Sennett, 1977).

Virtual Community

A leader in his field, Rheingold (1992) recalls “discovering a world that had been flourishing without [him]” (p. 1). Yet the commonalities apparent in this world of Rheingold’s were not based on geography or convenience, but on “mental and intellectual compatibility” (Johnston et al., 1997). “The Internet [is] used to plan and promote international activities” (Catalfo, 1993, p. 168) and provides an “intimate autonomy” (Rhoten, 2003). According to many, “the most important criterion in ‘global villages’ is one’s mind rather than the social categories ‘by which we judge each other’ applied to individuals as soon as they meet—‘man/woman, protestant/catholic/jew, doctor/patient, white/black/chicano/asian/[amerindian/alaskan/aboriginal/maori, teacher/student], first baseman/second baseman/shortstop” (Poster, 1997; Kollock & Smith, 1996; Ma, 1996; McLuhan, 1964; Schegloff, 1991; Turkle, 1996; Wilson, 1997).

“Although some disagree, advocates of virtual community generally identify with classic accounts of community” (Parrish, 2002, p. 262; Holmes, 1997). “Individuals come together to pursue and realize common interests, which tend to privilege the instrumental nature of particular interests and needs” (Holmes, 1997, p. 28; Meyrowitz, 1985). This common trust is described by the more traditional viewpoint of Jacobs (1992) where she discusses how “Sidewalks and other local public spaces create opportunities for passing but frequent interactions with one’s neighbours.” Jacobs (1992, p. 262) and Schmalenbach (1961) both discuss how “one can sustain a kind of community even with the silent passer-by whom one sees frequently on the street” (Jacobs, 1992, p. 55). “We have all of this potential; the challenge is what to do with it” (Annan, 2003).

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