Virtually Finding Community in the Third Space

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet has enabled individuals to communicate across continents and also through temporal spaces, making both place and time irrelevant to these communications. The specific interaction systems utilized for these purposes are referred to as computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies and encompass electronic mail (e-mail), bulletin board systems and Internet Relay Chat (IRC), to name the most well-known of these technologies. Each of these technologies allows for the gathering of individuals within cyberspace to converse and to exchange information with each other.

It is interesting to note that the terms communication and community stem from a Latin word meaning "common," and thus it can be inferred that communication is a process through which community can be developed (Fernback & Thompson, 1995). Licklider and Taylor (1968), predicted three decades ago that computer networks would become communities, and "in most fields they will consist of geographically separated members …" (online) gathering within a common communication space.

Earlier technologies such as the telephone have inspired scholars to state that we now live in a boundless "global village" (McLuhan, 1964). Current CMC technologies have brought about the possibility of numerous people meeting online and conversing with and between each other, allowing for a meeting "space" that consists of abrogated time and place (Fernback & Thompson, 1995), with no boundaries of race, gender or creed. It is from these utopian ideals that the idea of virtual communities has stemmed. The concept of the "virtual community" refers to groupings of individuals utilizing CMC technologies in such a way that they can be likened to communities in the physical world.

Rheingold (1993c) states that "virtual communities might be real communities, they might be pseudocommunities or they might be something entirely new in the realm of social contracts" (p. 62). Thus, the question still remains as to whether "virtual communities" can replicate communities that exist in the physical world.

THE "THIRD PLACE"

Writers and researchers in the field of CMC, and particularly proponents of the "virtual community," often refer to a theoretical "third place" as an explanation of the popularity of these technologies. The loss of the "third place" often is cited as a reason for the advent of virtual communities within cyberspace.

The "third place" is described as a physical space that exists between home and work (Oldenburg, 1989). It is a place for meeting and for gathering, a place that is sometimes referred to as "the Great Good Place" (Oldenburg, 1989). This space is the social equivalent of the local tavern, the coffee shop on the corner and the now-uncommon community potluck dinner. It is a space where personal validation and emotional support are offered freely. It is a neutral place, where conversation is the primary activity, and expression of individuality and personality is the primary goal (Coate, 1992 revised 1998).

Oldenburg (1989) proposes that it is within these "third spaces" that communities can come into being and flourish. However, the attendance within these spaces and the spaces themselves are in rapid decline (Oldenburg, 1989; Putnam, 1996; Valtersson, 1996), and following this is the decline of the community itself.

Interestingly, this trend of community erosion was also predicted almost a century earlier by Ferdinand Tönnies (1887). He stated that the processes of industrialization would cause the destruction of "gemeinschaft" (translating to community) and, thus, the traditional community (Tönnies, 1887).

By the German term "gemeinschaft," Tönnies (1887) is referring to the informal, natural and habitual connections represented by the family unit or the immediate neighborhood of an individual (Tönnies, 1887). "Gemeinschaft is characterized by an organic sense of community, fellowship, family and custom, as well as bounding together by understanding, consensus and language" (Fernback & Thompson, 1995, online). It is these ideals that form one of the earliest definitions of "community"; and it is these same ideals that are most often used to typify the concept of "community" today.

DEFINING "COMMUNITY"

Nevertheless, the meaning of the term "community" is still somewhat elusive. However, definitions of "community" tend to encompass the traits of "relationships; shared tasks; … interdependence; and of belonging … [communities] must also occupy some shared space, often with clearly identifiable boundaries" (Davis, 1997, online). Fernback and Thompson (1995) have stated that "the concept of community … refers to a set of social relationships that operate with specified boundaries or locales … [and have] a sense of common character, identity or interests" (online).

Variations on this theme also include communities described as "a collective of kinship networks which share a common geographic territory, a common history and a shared value system" (Critical-Art-Ensemble, 1995, online). Thus, we can say that a community is a gathering of individuals who interact socially and possess a sense of commonality between each individual member and the group as a whole.

"VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES"

It is these types of qualities that are said to also exist within online gatherings at newsgroups (Donath, 1997), bulletin boards/conferencing systems (Smith, 1992) and IRC (Reid, 1991), among other CMC technologies. As people gather and develop relationships with others on the Internet, these gatherings have become known as communities.

Rheingold (1993b) terms these online gatherings as "virtual communities," and defines them as "a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks" (p. 1). Thus, communities in cyberspace are spaces where individuals can gather to communicate and to become acquainted with each other over time.

The definitions above bear many characteristics that are reminiscent of communities that exist in the physical world. However, it is the differences (or lack thereof) present between virtual communities and traditional communities that have resulted in numerous publications claiming the accuracy of one view or the other – as to whether online communities are representative of the communities that exist in the physical world.

Virtual Communities: Not "Real" Communities

Turkle (1996) questions whether it is actually "sensible to suggest that the way to revitalize community is to sit alone in our rooms … and filling our lives with virtual friends," while others (e.g., Schwartz, 1995) counter "that it would be better to have a good simulation of community rather than [having] no community at all" (p. 37).

However, most opponents to the view that virtual communities are "real" communities challenge the legitimacy of a community that has no face-to-face contact. Weinreich (1997) claims that cyberspace cannot substitute for the experiences of face-to-face communication, which are vital to the development of trust, cooperation, friendship and community within a group of individuals. Shapiro (1999) similarly states that empathy, mutual understanding and social cohesiveness can only be achieved through shared experiences within the physical world.

Proponents of virtual communities constituting real communities (e.g., Coate, 1992 revised 1998; Rheingold, 1993c) agree, affirming that face-to-face meetings are of conceivable value in the creation of a true sense of community (Fernback & Thompson, 1995). The founders of The WELL ("Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link," www.well.com), a San Francisco-based conference site (Fernback & Thompson, 1995), are one of the first to have recognized the value of regular face-to-face contact. The founders hold monthly WELL parties for its members, and these have since become an important element of the identity of this communication space (Coate, 1992 revised 1998; Schwartz, 1995; Shapiro, 1999). Therefore, it would seem that without these physical interactions, the formation of a gathering reminiscent of a "real" community could be seen as a difficult feat.

Virtual Communities: "Real" Communities

However, despite the apparent difficulties in forming "real" communities online as described briefly in the previous section, there are also authors who believe that virtual communities can, and do, constitute "real" communities.

The most well-known proponents of this claim support their arguments with personal analogies of their experiences within these virtual gatherings (e.g., Rheingold, 1993a, 1993b; Wellman & Guilia, 1999). Others evidence their claims with studies of communities online (e.g., Donath, 1997; Reid, 1991; Smith, 1992). Each of these analogies recount encounters within cyberspace bearing resemblance to those that would occur within the physical world. The stories narrate events of support and aid offered between the inhabitants of virtual communication spaces, as they comfort each other through personal tragedies, heartbreak, cri-