

## Chapter 6

# Online Communities: A Historically Based Examination of How Social Formations Online Fulfill Criteria for Community

**Jakob Linnaa Jensen**  
*University of Aarhus, Denmark*

### **ABSTRACT**

*The metaphor of “community” has been among the most widely used when describing the Internet in political and sociological terms. It has dominated public and scholarly discourses at the expense of other early metaphors like “the information highway” (Parks, 2011: 105). This chapter discusses the concept of online communities from a historical and theoretical perspective. It is argued that the possibility and quality of online community formations online, widely discussed in literature, must be seen in the light of traditional, sociological understandings of social formations and community, taking into consideration the specific affordances and limitations of Internet based communication. It is argued that communities online do not resemble traditional close-knit, geographically bound communities but that they allow for valuable interactions and genuine passions and emotions anyway.*

*I will take the point of departure in traditional sociological understandings and definitions of community. Next, I will give a brief summary of the history of online social phenomena, major debates and attempts to define community online. It is followed by a thematic discussion of ideas and practices of online social relationships. I will argue that the traditional focus on community as the dominant metaphor in understanding social formation online might be somehow mistaken as the Internet, although not necessarily unable to foster genuine social relations, is materially different from the realm in which traditional communities were shaped. It is claimed, in the end, that a framework encompassing logics of network might be appropriate in understanding online communities.*

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## THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY

The concept of community is basically what Connolly (1974) has called an essentially contested concept: there are no clear, undisputed definitions and defining community often bears strong normative implications. In fact, community is among the most widely-used and heavily debated concepts within the social sciences. The word “community” is derived from the Old French “communité” which is derived from the Latin “communitas”, meaning fellowship or organism (Wikipedia, 2010). Community is often understood in connection with some kind of social bonding or social structure, like the tribe, the family or the city. Since the peace of Westphalia in 1648 the word has been widely used as the *raison d’être* for the emerging nation states: a certain country’s citizens share some interests and values and thus they have to participate in and contribute to the national community. Compulsory army service and schooling as well as flags and national hymns have been among the mechanisms to strengthen community. It is clear, however, that community traditionally has been connected to a sharing of a certain location, contrary to today’s “virtual” communities

One of the classic community theorists is the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1887) who distinguished between community (*gemeinschaft*) and society (*gesellschaft*). He claimed that in modern life the former has been replaced by the latter. Traditional close-knit communities based on kinship and physical proximity have been substituted by a large-scale society based on formal organizational structures and physical distance. Similarly, French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1893) described a shift from organic to mechanic solidarity. The social contract is no longer bound to local practices based on family, tribe or tradition but is regulated by abstract legal and technical procedures administered by bureaucracies or big industry. Both Tönnies and Durkheim share a notion of decline, that some-

thing original, ideal and natural has vanished or disappeared. Such pessimistic accounts are not unusual among classical sociological theorists. Also Marx and Weber developed their ideas in a time characterized by the decline of traditional communities and the upcoming of larger societies and a new, unknown social reality.

The regret on behalf of traditional community is even more profound among normative thinkers. Conservative, republican and Marxist thinkers show a rarely seen agreement in mourning the decline of traditional community. They share the view that community is larger than the sum of individuals. Republican thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau would even claim that human beings are not to be considered as humans outside the community.

Such ideas were put aside for a century; modern Western democracies are largely built on liberal notions that community is no more than the sum of individuals and that communities exist to serve the needs of the individuals, not the opposite. In recent decades, there has been a renewed focus on community, not at least in American political philosophy, where the so-called communitarian school of thinking builds upon republican philosophical ideas. Alisdair Macintyre (1981) and Michael Walzer (1983) have called for a renewal of community, a recognition of identity, sense and belonging and an establishment of smaller, communitarian political units. Community has also been brought to the political agenda by the new American Right, for instance in Sarah Palin’s Tea Party Movement.

This accentuated focus on community and traditional republican ideals on citizenship and civic virtue coincides with the rise of the Internet. Therefore it might be no surprise that much thinking on social relationships online has centered on the metaphor and ideas of community. As I will argue later, even though this is natural, it might be somehow mistaken in order to grasp the true scope of online social interactions.

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