
THE ONLINE COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

The worldwide web is a dynamic and social system that favours social platforms, user interaction and interactive content associated with contemporary social culture.

Where once the general computer user was confronted with a static screen of information allowing read-only interaction, the social shift of the Web from the late 20th century through to the early 21st century has seen the evolution of dynamic and versatile content that allows the user to not only read but interact with, write and execute the functionality of a web page they are viewing. Furthermore, with the ability to create such a dynamic experience with the social platforms available online, it is no surprise that many of these users belong to and participate in what is known as online communities.

With developing technology providing exciting new ways of communication and social interaction that competes with real world experience, online communities have evolved to such an extent that some sociologists have raised questions demonstrating their fears for the potential loss of traditional community.

Online communities and social networking platforms are a relatively simple concept sustained by user participation, but what has stemmed this participation and encouraged the use of this online? Do contemporary social networking platforms create community by simply existing or are they based on real world interaction and shared values in an attempt to replicate or even replace the traditional community?

Online communities exist in many different forms on the World Wide Web. Some have a clear purpose and others are accidental but authentic all the same. With the discussion of community producing political and cultural issues of current urgency, this thesis identifies the issues that make online social interaction and community so popular in contemporary society. In addition, this thesis also examines advancing technologies, discussing the positive and negative effects they could have on traditional and online community.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of online communities emerged in the mid 1950's prior to the development of the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA)¹ and what became known as the Web and Internet.

It has evolved into the contemporary existence of social networking platforms, such as Facebook.com, thriving on the exchange of information and knowledge through these platforms and various open source repositories, such as SourceForge.net, both of which will be discussed in the thesis.

Wikipedia.org, itself an example of an open source exchange of information, states that an online community, virtual community or e-community can be described as:

A group of people that primarily interact via communication media such as newsletters, telephone, email, online social networks or instant messages rather than face to face, for social, professional, educational or other purposes².

For the purpose of the thesis, the term 'online community' will be used to represent community on a web based platform.

William J. Mitchell's *City of Bits* explores the idea of community as 'a body of people living in one place, district or county' (1996: 160). Theoretically an online community no longer requires a body of people residing in one physical location, communicating only with those within the local vicinity. A community is no longer limited to the marking of boundaries around a physical property or a specific area. Instead these boundaries or locations are relocated to the vicinity of cyber space. The address typed in a web browser may not be a physical location, but it is a location one has to visit to join a specific community.

¹ ARPA - The Advanced Research Projects Agency. This agency was part of the defence department and was presented to the public with a mission - to bolster national defence (Moschovitis et al. 1999:34). This became ARPANET: marking the first time that a number of computers were connected together in order to exchange data and messages (Smith and Kollock 1999:01).

² Wikipedia.org 2009 - Online Communities (Link: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_community)

The Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (The WELL) was an online location for conversation and discussion, which emerged in the 1980's. Howard Rheingold first coined the term 'Virtual Community', and the WELL is widely known as the starting place for the online community development³. The WELL states that "... [it] ... is a cluster of electronic towns on the Net, inhabited by people from all over the world"⁴, which is an excellent analogy of location online in relation to the real world.

The internet provides a mode of communication that allows a global community to be formed regardless of racial group, gender, culture, nationality, health or interest. According to Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia in *Virtual communities as communities: Net surfers don't ride alone*, it is this global connectivity that de-emphasises the importance of locality for community and all that is required is a network connection (1999: 187).

The evolvement of community online can be seen through certain periods in history over the last 60 years. Although the Internet did not emerge in its contemporary form until 1989⁵, as a communication tool it has existed since the mid 1950's in the form of the SHARE⁶ group, which was founded in 1955. The emergence of online community can be seen via the Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operations (PLATO) system, developed in the early 1960's two decades before the 'Worldwide Web' was established (Wooley 1994). Few believed that a computer system could maintain and build a human community, but PLATO demonstrated that it could and would inevitably happen (Wooley 1994).

Smith & Kollock in *Communities in Cyberspace* mention that in the present day mass-marketed computers are affordable and available, which allows more people to access the internet from the comfort of their own home (1999: 03). It is easy to connect to a network, local or distant, and communicate with others. In the past, people used networked online

³ Well.com 2009: About Page (Link: <http://www.well.com/aboutwell.html>)

⁴ The WELL.com 2009: About Page (Link: <http://www.well.com/aboutwell.html>)

⁵ 1989 – The internet bulletin board system Quantum Computer Services acquired the name America Online (AOL) and '[focused] on recruiting a diverse, broad based subscribership' (Moschovitis et al 1999:142)

⁶ Share.org 2009 – (Link: <http://www.share.org/AboutSHARE/tabid/65/Default.aspx>)

communities for communication, to stay ahead of enemy attacks and to utilise improved productivity within the workplace. International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) and the SHARE group were an example of this⁷. Contemporary websites offer much more than just improved productivity and communication.

But do these actions mean participation within a community?

Does signing up to a website with a username and password immediately mean becoming part of a community? This leads to question how an online community is constructed and if partaking and communicating across social platforms allows one to become part of that community.

Some critics argue that although online groups are well constructed and established they do not constitute real communities. Others argue that online communities have the potential to support face to face communities and help hold local communities together, but how is this achieved? (1999:16).

This thesis analyses the concept of online communities and the fundamental aspects of what constitutes an online community compared to traditional community in the real world. With particular emphasis on the transformation of traditional read-only websites and the facilitation of historical online communities through to contemporary social networking platforms, the thesis discusses the development of these communities and participation in existing social platforms, code repositories and forums. It further investigates the reasons why consumers use certain social networking and community areas and not others and finally it speculates on the future of social interaction, communication and online communities.

The first chapter examines the development of community discussing the transformation in real-world community and online community. It will examine the fundamental aspects of what an online community actually is, drawing upon the history and emergence of online

⁷ Share.org 2009 – (Link: <http://www.share.org/AboutSHARE/tabid/65/Default.aspx>)

communities, discussing events that transformed the online community to its contemporary status.

The second chapter investigates contemporary online communities and social networking platforms, discussing their structure as a community. This chapter also critically analyses code repositories and the open source culture, discussing the transformation from the static web to the social web.

The final chapter speculates on whether online community exists as a development of traditional community or if it is a separate culture competing with tradition. This chapter also examines identity and trust as underlying factors in the success and functionality of online communities and it also considers the future implications of the transformation of communities to an online form and discusses the impact technology could have on these.

CHAPTER 1- THE EMERGENCE OF ONLINE COMMUNITY

This chapter establishes and explores definitions of community. What makes a community? Who is it defined by? Is it the people that supposedly belong to a community that should decide if they are inside or outside, or is it others outside the community who ultimately decide whether a group of people interacting or living together can be called a community?

Also, does the established traditional definition of community need to be developed further to encompass online communities and the global village?

These questions are considered under the following sections of 'traditional communities' and 'online communities'.

1.1. TRADITIONAL COMMUNITIES

The online Oxford Dictionary defines the word community as the following:

1 a group of people living together in one place [,] 2 the people of an area or country considered collectively; society [,] 3 a group of people with a common religion, race, or profession: the scientific community [,] 4 the holding of certain attitudes and interests in common [and] 5 a group of interdependent plants or animals growing or living together or occupying a specified habitat.⁸

The first two definitions provide a more popular understanding of the word community. The members of a village for example were at one time seen as a group of socially similar people that were part of a local community, often dependant on the livelihood that was available in that area. Factory workers would need to live near the factories alongside other factory workers and this could be identified as a separate community, as would whalers or fisherman who would need to be near the ports for maritime trade (Mitchell 1996: 164).

Community in these cases is created by location and occupation. They often featured small, tightly-knit groups with limited means of communication. Their main mode of

⁸ AskOxford.com online - (Link: http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/community?view=uk)

communication was verbal with writing, before electronic mail was available (Connor 2000). Opportunity, in terms of career or occupation, was limited to people they knew in the local vicinity. A child's parent would teach the core skills required to work and live in the local environment. Friends, family and associates socialised, communicated and worked together on a face to face and verbal basis because that was the only method available to them. People in close proximity learn the truth about those they reside with and this closeness is not difficult to achieve if people live in the same place.

However in the third quoted definition, community is more dependent on belief and common purpose. Jodi O' Brien in *Writing in the body: gender (re)production in online interaction*, whilst talking about gender in online interactions, stated that 'Agreements about morality constitute the basis for community' (1999: 91-92). This statement applies to traditional communities as well as online communities.

Anthony Cohen in *The Symbolic Construction of Community* suggests that using the word 'community' establishes a symbolic boundary around a class of people, using language to mark a difference between people inside and those outside (1985: 12). Cohen also suggests that the word is loosely used to imply 'that the members of a group ... have something in common with each other, which distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups' (p. 12). This is supported by Ian Hughes in *What is Community?* He suggests being part of a community implies that those inside are similar to each other and different from others, which inevitably creates a bond between some people and excludes others. He adds: 'Thus community implies and creates a boundary between us and them, inside group and outside group' (1995). These sociological views reinforce the idea that community need not depend on people congregating in one place.

Phil Bartle in *What is Community?* suggested that the community is not just the people who are in it. He states that 'the community would already exist when all of the current residents were not yet born, and it would likely continue to exist when all of these people had left'. This helps to explain how traditional communities have evolved and survived through the centuries. He also believes community to be a model or construct, something 'we cannot touch ... [or] ... directly experience' (2008). Bartle's ideas suggest that

community is more of a symbol rather than something physical. This is reinforced by Cohen.

Over the last century, sociologists have been concerned about how advancing technology along with 'bureaucratisation, urbanisation and capitalism' would affect communities, including a fear of '... [losing] ... community, leaving a handful of transitory, disconnected, weakly supportive relationships' (Wellman and Gulia 1999: 169). However, contrary to this view, major advancements in technology bare close correlation with the spread and growth of communities.

It was the development of writing that extended communities beyond the local vicinity. Johannes Gutenberg's printing press way back in 1440 would eventually lead to world news spreading to the global community and the development of postal services would advance the communications between friends and families outside their local communities (Bellis 1997). These were both major tools in extending the reach of the local community further afield.

Work by individuals such as Nikola Tesla, Thomas Edison, Samuel Morse, Antonio Meucci, George Westinghouse, and Alexander Graham Bell led to inventions such as the induction motor, the light bulb and distribution of electrical energy, the long-range telegraph, the telephone, the first electrically powered locomotive, and many others⁹.

With modernisation and the development of such inventions, sociologists discovered that their fears of advancing technologies on existing community were largely unfounded. Wellman and Gulia suggest existing ties within modern day communities in the real world are only part of people's overall networks 'because cars, planes and telephones can maintain relationships over long distances' (1999: 169) so interaction is not confined by physical location. They realised that a community does not require close knit neighbours, but can be social networks of kin, friends and workmates from virtually any accessible location on the globe. Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media* suggested that 'the globe is no more than a village' (1964: 05) and Wellman and Gulia draw upon McLuhan's ideas

⁹ Wikipedia.org 2009 - Electricity (Link: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electricity>)

suggesting that ‘this conceptual revolution moved from defining community in terms of space – neighbourhoods - to defining it in terms of social networks’ (1999: 169).

Bartle believes boundaries are of great importance in the construction of community. The boundary of a local village for example is far more stringent than the boundaries of an urban community, where there are often communities within communities. The boundaries associated with urban communities are ‘fuzzy’, and according to Bartle have more ‘complex and sophisticated goals, than rural communities’ (2008). The ‘fuzzy’ boundaries of these communities compare closely with those created for online communities, as they are more difficult to organise using standard community development methods.

The understanding of the term community has developed from the traditional factors based on location and occupation to other ideas, beliefs and interests and specifically developments in technology. It can also be seen that these developments have led to an expansion of the idea of community that is not confined by location. However, it is clear that for a community to exist there must be some idea, purpose or other factor that is shared by a number of individuals. This unites them in some way that forms what we recognise as community.

1.2. ONLINE COMMUNITIES

The Internet allowed the expansion of communication, which is a key development in the creation of community within cyberspace. Wellman and Gulia posed questions such as: ‘Can people find community online in the internet? Can relationships between people who never see, smell, touch or hear each other be supportive and intimate?’ (1999: 167). According to Wellman, there is what he terms ‘Manicheans’¹⁰ on either side of this debate who view one of two possibilities: ‘The Internet will either create wonderful new forms of community or will destroy community altogether’. The second and third chapters of this thesis discuss this in more detail.

¹⁰ “Manichean” has come to describe a tendency to see things in overly simple terms as wholly evil or wholly good, with no shadings or nuances. Manicheism was a widespread world religion (Merillat 1997)

When exploring definitions of the word cyber, the online Oxford Dictionary defined it as ‘a combining form relating to information technology, the Internet, and virtual reality: cyberspace’¹¹

Cyberspace at present is home to at least 390 million visitors in Europe alone, with estimated internet users in the world at 1,574,313,184¹². Today’s culture utilises the internet as a commodity of everyday life, to organise, entertain and fulfil our job requirements in many circumstances. Social networking sites, code repositories, self help and virtual worlds are all among the most popular on the internet but to discuss further we must review the origins of cyberspace and in particular the evolvement of online communities through history.

One of the first instances of an online social community was the SHARE group, founded in 1955 as a volunteer user group for IBM¹³. A small number of IT professionals set up a community to fix problems around the IBM mainframe code. This was one of the earliest examples of a group of people within a local vicinity using advancements in technology to move beyond face to face communication (Share 1985).

Following the launch of Sputnik¹⁴ by the USSR in the late 1950’s, ARPA was launched. According to Neil Randall in *The Soul of the Internet*, this communications network was based on research carried out later by the US government with ARPA to ensure the survival of a communications network if there was to be a military attack (1997: 09). This led to the development of packet switching¹⁵, the basis for all internet communication. Mitchell believed this period to be the unnoticed Big Bang: ‘the silent blast of bits that begat the new communities of the digital era’ (1996: 107).

¹¹ AskOxford.com 2009 – cyber (link: http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/cyber?view=uk)

¹² InternetWorldStats.com 2008 - (link: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>)

¹³ Wikipedia.org 2009 – Share (link: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SHARE_\(computing\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SHARE_(computing)))

¹⁴ Sputnik - The first satellite in the world to achieve earth orbit and the soviet superiority refers to the high standard of space leadership meaning military leadership and a potential soviet attack (1997:09)

¹⁵ Packet Switching: Digital data is sent over a distributed network and reassembled at the other end (Moschovitis et al 1999:45)

Wooley suggests that the emergence of online community can be seen via PLATO (1994), which was designed for computer based education. Throughout the 1960's it remained a small system until in 1973-74 the sense of an online community emerged. PLATO's original purpose was not that of an online community, but it developed in to this because of its communication features (Wooley 1994).

Another organisation known as the WELL spontaneously emerged in 1985¹⁶. This organisation was provided for conversation and discussion, advertising for intelligent creative people. Wired Magazine had a cover story, stating the WELL as 'the world's most influential online community'¹⁷.

Rheingold in *The Virtual Community* stated that 'it became clear to [him] during the first months of that history that [he] was participating in the self-design of a new kind of culture' in reference to the WELL (1994: 02). A new kind of culture at the time was an accurate way to describe the use of advancing technologies as a way of communicating and creating community and networks of friends and associates in cyberspace.

Other forms of educational real-life communities, such as Universities were quick to explore the potential of networks in the 1960's. Mitchell discussed Dartmouth as an example, who had a network of interactive terminals put in place on campus and heavily used (1996: 68). At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the 1980's, the campus-wide 'Athena'¹⁸ system pioneered the use of networked workstations, something that was commonplace by the 1990's. Mitchell adds that 'online conferences, classes, newsgroups and bulletin boards began to challenge departmental common rooms and traditional physical meeting places as the best place to pick up information on specialised topics' (1996: 69).

¹⁶ The WELL was a dial up bulletin board system to link home computers with an intentional community rather than an accidental community emerging out of the communication features (Mitchell 1996:108)

¹⁷ Well.com 2009 – (link: <http://www.well.com/aboutwell.html>)

¹⁸ Athena - is a packaging of MIT developed services with standard operating system and third party software (link: <http://web.mit.edu/is/topics/athena/>)

Some commentators have warned that the danger of online communities becoming over-dependant on machines may not only be science-fiction. Matteo Pasquinelli in *Cultural Labour and Immaterial Machines* uses an example of the cigarette machine replacing the tobacconist, an example of how post-fordist theories live around us and how technology basically mimics the creations in the real world but in a technological way. He also states that 'when the brains of machines evolve in to self-consciousness, it could be the end of the human race' (2006: 269). This was quite an extreme view, but not completely farfetched. Smith & Kollock discussed critics, for example Theodore Roszak, who believed cyberspace and network evolvment had a darker outcome where individuals could be trapped and ensnared. Roszak also believed that networks would disproportionately increase the strength of existing concentrations of power, offering new opportunities for surveillance and control. Others, such as Al Gore opposed this belief looking in to the positive effects it could have, with potential benefits for democracy and prosperity (1999: 04). The potential to renew community by strengthening bonds that connect us to the wider social world was another positive view of this growth.

The growing networks in particular are compared to advancements in the real world on many occasions by various authors. Mitchell considered the story of online communities (up to 1996) as urban history replayed in fast forward, meaning the progressions we've experienced as individuals within communities, urban and otherwise, are mimicked as online communities advance online (1996: 131). As traditional cities are evolving, so are cyberspace cities as networks and communities.

Along with growing networks came the growth of inexpensive mass-marketed personal computers. This started with the Altair in 1974 followed by IBM's and Apple Macintosh's in the 1980's, to the advanced personal computers available in today's market (1996: 109). This expanded the potential of cyberspace, by placing technology that had the potential to communicate with people all over the world within local and urban communities. Indeed, Mitchell believes that modern day computers are primarily communication devices, '... [Whose] role is to construct cyberspace: a new kind of place for human interactions and transactions' (1996: 109). This was an early example of the potential for online communities to flourish within a physically existing community.

Contemporary computer networks emerged as ways to connect people to people (Smith & Kollock 1999: 03). Using the technology of internet and networking, users are creating thousands if not millions of groups to discuss politics, play games or simply chat to friends. The development from static websites to social networking platforms also changed the way communication occurs between people online, becoming fast and efficient. It is clear that computer networks and their development has helped to create these new social spaces for communication and interaction, but do they constitute community?

This chapter discussed the separate definitions of traditional communities and online communities.

Traditional community depends on there being common location, occupation, idea, belief or another factor that unites individuals in common purpose to form community. This did not have to be confined by time or place and opened the way for community to exist more remotely. After a brief look in to the history of community as a model, this chapter examined the major breakthroughs that occurred to help online communities emerge in the late 20th Century and early 21st Century, and looked at some of the technological developments that influenced this process

Since online communities would not exist without some common purpose between the people who inhabit them, the fundamental requirement for a community would appear to be satisfied. However, the following question now arises: Are online communities really communities or just more sophisticated communication systems dependant on technology?

CHAPTER 2 – TYPES OF ONLINE COMMUNITY

This chapter considers the implications and the structure of online communities as they exist on the contemporary web. It takes in to account the shift towards a social web, including social networking platforms and the open source culture. Contemporary community group types and code repositories are also discussed.

2.1. ONLINE COMMUNITY FROM THE COMFORT OF HOME

‘When people chat, get information and find support on the net, do they experience real community or just the inadequate simulacra about which Jim Hightower¹⁹ and Mark Slouka²⁰ have warned?’ (Wellman and Gulia 1999: 178).

Mitchell states that ‘if you want to understand how a community – physical or virtual – has grown and survived, look to its economic base’ (1996: 33). In terms of online community, the technology involved to create the structural starting point of the social platform is a very important factor. Olga Goriunova and Alexei Shulgin in *Art on Networks to Art on Platforms (Case Studies: runme.org, micormusic.net and udaff.com)* suggest that a platform is a website organised in a special way that ‘differentiates itself from other websites by the relations of creative, social, instrumental, educational and historical character it establishes and is involved with’ (2006: 237).

Technological advancements in the past decade have allowed the development of these social platforms and Pasquinelli views contemporary technology as the latest addition to the series of collective agents generated by history: ‘religion – theology – philosophy – ideology – science – *technology*’ (2006: 271). The latest addition is the one that is remembered or the ‘network that embodies the dreams of the previous political generation’ (2006: 271); in this case technology. These previous political generations

¹⁹ Hightower warned over the ABC radio network: ‘While all the razzle-dazzle connects us electronically, it disconnects us from each other, having us “interfacing” more with computers and TV screens than looking in the face of our fellow human beings (Wellman and Gulia 1999:178)’.

²⁰ Slouka in *War of the Worlds: Cyberspace and the Hi-tech Assault on Reality* worried: ‘Where does the need come from to inhabit these alternate spaces? And the answer I keep coming back to is: to escape the problems and issues of the real world’ (Wellman and Gulia 1999:169)

worried about the loss of community due to post-contemporary new technologies such as the telephone or car but contemporary generations would consider the Internet as the largest threat to date.

Why is this? Why does each new technology seem to bring with it a threat of destruction for community in the real world? With the internet, critics worry that 'life on the net can never be meaningful or complete because it will lead people away from the full range of in-person contact' or they will 'lose contact with "real life"' (Wellman and Gulia 1999: 168). This opinion is based on the assumption that people's lives on the internet are completely separate from their real lives, as if users were constantly engaging in Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs)²¹. However, interacting online does not necessarily mean less interaction in the real world.

Technology now allows many everyday tasks to be completed from home. Where once people would visit markets to shop or gather on street corners to 'mingle with fellow citizens' (O'Brien 1999: 88), they now visit an online version of a shopping mall or department store. Mitchell suggests that 'increasingly ... merchants will find that they can dispense with sale floors and sales staff altogether' (1996: 90). Indeed many contemporary organizations such as EBuyer.com or Amazon.co.uk only exist online. The President of Time Warner also reiterates this point: 'We're talking about a fundamental shift in advertising ... You can bring the showroom to your house and take a 15 minute walk through it'²² (1996: 91).

The development of open source material also plays a large role in online interaction. No longer do individuals seek help from others in a face to face situation. Advice is found through open source code repositories, forums and tutorials provided by communities of developers who believe in the open source culture. According to Sun Microsystems and their ideas about free and open source software, open source is about diverse communities

²¹ The first MUD was written by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle and was based on Dungeons and Dragons, hence the name, and they have been popular since the early 1980's (Mitchell 1996:201). MUD's online also provide settings or urban neighbourhoods in cyberspace for interaction and role playing online (1996: 118)

²² John Tierney ("Will they sit by the Set, or Ride a Data Highway?" The New York Times, Sunday, June 20, 1993, p.1) - (Mitchell 1996:91)

and is built on the community development process, not simply publishing free source code²³.

It is possible that being able to choose a specific community based on its social scene and content is more appealing than participating within the local community, a place where 'your community consisted of your close neighbours; you could love it or leave it' (1996: 166).

It is clear that some people prefer socialising in circles that have more relation to them than the people who reside in their home town, with whom they may have no common ground. This view is supported by Bartle and his opinions of community, discussed earlier. It is also clear that developments in technology have provided more opportunities for online interaction rather than face to face interaction. However, this does not mean that online communities have a negative impact on traditional communities, as discussed in part two of this chapter.

2.2. THE SOCIAL NETWORKING COMMUNITY

The contemporary web is flooded with many social networking platforms allowing one to explore information, blog and stay in touch. A small selection of contemporary platforms could be Facebook.com, MySpace.com²⁴, Bebo.com²⁵ and of course the famous WELL.com²⁶. Facebook.com will serve as the core example in the thesis, due to practical experience associated with this social networking platform.

Facebook.com, currently with over 150 million users²⁷, along with social networking in general has become a very popular pastime in contemporary culture. Goriunova and

²³ Sun.com 2009 – Free and Open Source Software (link: <http://www.sun.com/software/opensource/benefits.jsp>)

²⁴ MySpace.com 2009 – Is a place of firends, self expression and keeps you connected (link: <http://www.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=userTour.home>)

²⁵ Bebo.com 2009 – Popular social networking: states that it is your life online (link: <http://www.bebo.com/StaticPage.jsp?StaticPageId=2517103831>)

²⁶ Wikipedia.org 2009 – (link: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites)

²⁷ Facebook.com 2008 (correct as of November) (link: <http://www.facebook.com/facebook?ref=pf>)

Shulgin suggest that these types of platforms are ‘usually built by enthusiasts and [are] almost never the result of any stipend, grant or salary’ (2006: 246), which in terms of the creation of Facebook.com is accurate. The community feel associated with Facebook resembles the famous Well, which according to Mitchell, ‘belongs to the communitarian, utopian²⁸ tradition’ (1996: 161).

The Well was an intentional community and Rheingold stated that ‘[it] felt like an authentic community to [him] from the start because it was grounded in [his] everyday physical world’ (1994: 02).

The idea of establishing a link between technology and reality in terms of communication is nothing new. The telephone for example, allowed people who had stepped out of the boundaries laid down in traditional communities, to stay in touch.

Facebook.com by definition ‘... helps you connect and share with the people in your life’. Its success could be down to the relative structure of the platform it is created on. Goriunova and Shulgin suggest that platforms in general are ‘aimed at supporting and stimulating creative initiatives and work’ and in technical terms,

‘a platform should have an open database with a user-friendly interface that anyone can download from/ upload to and instruments for the contextualization and development of a practice it works with’ (2006: 238).

The social networking platforms mentioned earlier are based on this structure, which is why they are successful. For example, an account with Facebook consists of 274 friends²⁹, belonging to two main networks, Plymouth the City (28 friends) and the University of Plymouth (46 friends). It is easy to update blogs, write comments, upload photos and videos, organise events and stay in contact with friends and family, but does this network

²⁸ Wikipedia.org 2009 – Utopia is the name for an ideal community or society (link: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utopian>)

²⁹ 274 is the total spanning across other titles that do not need to be discussed here. I include Plymouth and the University of Plymouth as main networks for the purpose of this discussion.

of people constitute community? In traditional terms, yes, because they reside with other members in the same location, allowing potential face to face contact on a regular basis.

But of course this does not happen as Wellman & Gulia discuss: ‘... most contemporary communities in the developed world do not resemble rural or urban villages where all know and have frequent face-to-face contact’ (1999: 182). Even when in close proximity, people often utilise technologies like text messaging, email and live messenger. This does not replace the face to face relationship of course; for many of us it works in conjunction with it. However, it is likely that more than half of the ties between “friends” on Facebook.com are stronger online than they are in the real world, simply because it is easier to leave a note on the person’s wall³⁰ than speak to them in person.

This does not mean that community in the real world is less meaningful or appealing. The ties remain strong in between face to face contacts thanks to this technology. Without these ties created by the community of Facebook, or indeed any other popular social networking site³¹, many face to face relationships based on weak ties would cease to exist. Facebook in particular creates a more interesting transition period between face to face contacts than emails and phone calls can ever provide. They are also part of daily routine for many users, as Goriunova and Shulgin mention: ‘These platforms succeed only if they appear as vivid reactions ... and feeling that they are needed at a particular moment of time for a particular practice’ (2006: 246). This supports the concept that online communities have a positive effect on traditional community but in conjunction with knowing somebody prior to commencing a relationship with them online.

Prime examples of communities developed solely online through technology and the open source culture would be code repositories, forums and information exchange platforms.

³⁰ The Wall on Facebook is the main focal point of an individual’s profile pages. Other friends can write on your wall as well as yourself of course, visible for all of your networks to see. People can also comment on posts you have made.

³¹ Wikipedia.org 2009 - MySpace is the most popular with 253,145,404 registered users, then Facebook.com (140,000,000 users) and then Windows Live Spaces (120,000,000 users) (link: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites)

Code repositories are a huge open source phenomenon provided by generous amateurs and professionals of the language they choose to provide for. Many questions can be asked and answered depending on the forum or repository chosen. Contemporary repositories such as Codase.com³², SourceForge.net³³, PHP.net³⁴ and Kirupa.com provide just that, with the latter providing numerous tutorials for anyone who wants to learn something new. The mission statement from Kirupa.com states that:

Kirupa.com is a site that aims to make designers better developers, and maybe even help developers become better designers. We try to accomplish that via detailed and (occasionally) funny articles that not only teach you something cool but hopefully show you that coding or designing can be fun³⁵.

The content of this repository and many others is free to use and provides an open source of information that anyone can access. Codase.com even provides a syntax aware search engine that provides instant access to a database full of information shared by programmers. This leads to the question of why information and free labour is so readily available online.

If one was to meet these generous designers and developers that provide this material face to face, surely one would feel unworthy, almost rude requesting the source code for various projects that the designer or developer had created? It is almost as if the internet provides a shroud over user's actions and activity, allowing them to do things and ask questions that they could never do in the real world. Wellman & Gulia suggest that 'it is a general norm of community that whatever is given ought to be repaid, if only to ensure that more is available when needed' (1999: 177) but there is little evidence to suggest that the users of these various tutorials give much back to the provider. However there is substantial

³² Codase.com 1996 – Very popular source code search company search engine (link: <http://codase.com>)

³³ SourceForge.net 2009 – open source software (link: <http://sourceforge.net/>)

³⁴ Php.net 2009 – Massive PHP scripting source (link: <http://www.php.net>)

³⁵ Kirupa.com 2009 – (link: http://blog.kirupa.com/?page_id=2)

evidence to suggest reciprocal supportiveness on the net, regardless of the relationship between those who are providing and those that are receiving support.

OpenOffice.org is an example of a highly successful open source project that has grown thanks to community participation. Anyone can use it for free and suggest ideas to make it better. Through its own self admission, 'as part of a community dedicated to free software, we also value your freedom of choice' and the reward for participating in this community is represented by every updated version, with additional features that any developer can provide³⁶.

Another reason for this free labour online is the establishment of status within the communities built up from the forums and the tutorials. It is likely that if one is not known, they are less likely to receive help. This is supported by Wellman and Gulia when they suggest that some analysts believe 'the greater the social and physical distance between the support seeker and provider ... the less likely that reciprocity will take place' (1999: 177). But support is provided to strangers and not only in terms of advice (the WELL) but also in the form of free tutorials, often supplied in case someone might find them interesting. This community feel is examined by Rheingold when he discusses knowledge and social capital: 'I can increase your knowledge capital and my social capital at the same time by telling you something you need to know' and 'the person I help may never be in a position to help me, but someone else might be' (1994: 60). He backs this up by adding: 'Sometimes you give more information than you would give another person in response to the same query simply because you recognise one of them to be more generous ...' (p. 59-60). This explores a potential reason for this gift economy shown by many online and that social economy and wealth is worth more than actual money.

Rheingold believes people come to the WELL for one of two reasons: 'Some ... only for the community, some only for the ... information, and some want both' (1994: 56). A large proportion of users will visit code repositories for the second reason. The Net is not an isolated phenomenon for gift economy in this sense. People provide assistance every day,

³⁶ OpenOffice.org – home to the world's leading open-source office suite (link: <http://www.openoffice.org/>)

not to receive something back, but perhaps in the hope that one day they might receive assistance if required.

This only adds to the strength and importance of ties that can be created within an online community. If people are capable of creating such powerful bonds with strangers, then existing bonds between people in the real world can only be strengthened by online communication.

This chapter discussed the positive and negative aspects of online communities in relation to the development of technologies and the tradition of real world communities. It also discussed some examples of open source developments and social networking platforms and the reasons for their success on the contemporary web. Having looked at some of the threats and concerns of previous technologies, the conclusion was reached that rather than being a threat to community, online communities can actually improve relations in the real world, especially those that are weakened by distance or lack of face to face interaction.

However this leads on to question how relationships are formed and maintained without the physical cues you experience with face to face contact, which is discussed in the final chapter.

CHAPTER 3 – WHO AM I COMMUNICATING WITH?

This final chapter speculates on whether online communities constitute communities in the traditional sense. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the issue of identity and trust within an online community to further understand the possibility of community online. Finally it considers the implications for the future of community, in the real world and online and seeks to understand the possible developments that could occur with advancing technology.

3.1. ONLINE COMMUNITY FOR THE GOOD OF HUMANITY

Contemporary Internet provides a vast exploration of virtual reality for those that want to experience it. The web provides a direct link with the wider world and because of this many people utilise the communication abilities of its systems, be it live chat, email, forums or social networking.

Mark Poster in *The Second Media Age* draws on Rheingold who attributes the sociable aspects of the WELL and the extravagant identity transformations of MUDs to ‘the hunger for community that has followed the disintegration of traditional communities all over the world’ (1995: 35). For Rheingold, the concept of real community and the foundations of tradition regulate the understanding of the new interactivity that is online communities.

Post Modern Culture, according to Poster is ‘often presented as an alternative to existing society, which is pictured as structurally limited or fundamentally flawed’ (1995: 23). He compares this with new communication systems, which are seen as ‘a hopeful key to a better life and a more equitable society’. Could this be the difference between online communities and real communities? Does post-modern culture in terms of online communities replace the traditional community because of technology utilisation and should this be providing a better social existence? Rheingold’s statement above supports this theory.

There is a constant drive to renew and improve everything that is deemed important to community and society and the Internet is a technology that portrays this in the form of

regular updates, new software and faster broadband for example. Poster saw the technical innovations of post-modernity as not just new domains of leisure or increased productivity at work but a 'broad and extensive change in the culture, in the way identities are structured' (1995: 24).

This does not mean that traditional communities are flawed. Rheingold suggested that there is a hunger for a new type of community but it is not necessarily a hunger to replace what is there in the real world. It could instead be a desire to find new ways of utilising technology to reinforce the requirements of communities in the real world, such as the need to stay in contact with others who have moved away. Facebook is a prime example of this. However, there is the possibility of individuals becoming more inclined to use technology instead of face to face interaction as it becomes easier to do everything online. This is a threat to traditional community and the identity of those around us.

There is even greater emphasis on the cultural change we are experiencing in terms of our interactions in real life and online. For all the similarities virtual and real world communities bare, in terms of structure and user participation, the interaction that goes on is very different. Poster sums this up by stating: 'the opposition "virtual" and "real" community contains serious difficulties' (1995: 34).

3.2. IDENTITY: A KEY ROLE IN COMMUNITY

A number of authors have concerns about the identity issue with online communities and whether online groups constitute real communities (Smith & Kollock 1999: 16). Many authors do not agree with the concept of strong ties being at all possible with an online platform, due to the lack of knowledge of one's identity online, or the person being interacted with.

According to Judith Donath in *Identity and deception in the virtual community*, 'identity plays a key role in virtual communities' (1999: 29). In terms of understanding and evaluating an interaction, it is vital to know who you are communicating with because in online interaction there are none of the physical cues we are accustomed to experiencing face to face. The real world provides us with the body of the person we are interacting with,

along with the physical cues that tell us they are interested, disinterested etc. The key difference with identity online is that the body and identity are separated. The body is at the keyboard, but the identity is theoretically whatever the body wants it to be, rather than what it actually is. Donath supports this by mentioning that 'the virtual world ... is composed of information rather than matter' (1999: 29). But this separation does not prevent relationships building online, whether they are between identities or people.

Joseph Walther in *Relational Aspects of Computer-mediated Communication: Experimental Observations over time* suggested that 'the medium does not prevent close relationships from growing but simply slows the process' (1995: 186 - 203) in relation to online communities and internet as the medium. This suggests that the relationships within online communities can become as close as real world community, but over a longer period of time. This is due to the lack of physical cues that are present in face to face interaction, but it also relates to the trust that needs to be built with the interacting person. Trust is an issue to do with identity and morality in online communications. There is no guarantee that in real life the person in a relationship is the person they say they are, but one is far more likely to pick this up early on. With no face to face contact and only information provided in cyberspace by the person in question, this becomes a far more serious concern and is one of the reasons the trust of a relationship takes longer to build online.

Trust is not automatic in normal society, nor is the presumption that the identity of members in these communities stays constant. Poster draws upon Jean-Luc Nancy's ideas about community: 'The notion of a real community ... presupposes the fixed, stable identities of its members, the exact assumption that internet communities put into question' (1995: 35). Nancy's views on community focus primarily on the absence of community, with a focus on 'the matrix of fragmented identities, each pointing toward the other, which he chooses to term "writing"' (p. 34). The absence of community could be more associated with online communities rather than defining community in the real world. Essentially the existence of online communities relies on us to not be in the same vicinity, taking the 'community' out of community. The real community in this sense only exists in cyberspace. The separation of identity from the body proves that community is possible in essence without the presence of another community member.

Online interaction also raises serious political implications like racism or deception, even though the lack of physical cues on the screen would not reveal it. Byron Burkhalter in *Reading race online* suggested that ‘one might predict that discrimination on the basis of race, age, gender, sexuality, class status and group membership would disappear’ (1999: 63). When discussing the consequences for races online, Burkhalter states that ‘far from being a site where ... racism ... [is] banished, [this] phenomena [flourishes] in newsgroups’ (p. 73). Burkhalter’s research in to Usenet discussions indicated that the ‘technology may be revolutionary and expectations utopian’ (p. 74) but the people that take part in these newsgroups are ordinary, meaning that however advanced the communication technology used, the relationship between the people interacting is what matters. Racial identity, along with other aspects of identity in online communities relies on what the participant releases about themselves.

Once again, this brings up the issue of trust and reciprocity, which are essential for successful communities both in the real world and online. The lack of physical cues alone does not cause trust to be excluded online, but how is trust created between those that don’t know each other and will never meet?

Adrian Chan (2007) in *The Social Engine that drives Review Sites* states that: ‘User-generated content sites [such as Newsgroups, Facebook, MySpace etc...] offer the promise of authenticity’ simply because the content is ‘... by the people, of the people, for the people’. This holds true for a number of topic based web communities, such as the Well, where the topics for discussion are created and answered by the members. Rheingold (1994: 17) gives an example of this when he required an answer to a parenting issue late at night³⁷. Chan (2007) draws upon Yelp.com and mentions that the integrity of the site is preserved because of the absence of merchant presence within the reviewing area, something that Goriunova and Shulgin mention when discussing contemporary social networking platforms. Essentially without this merchant presence, almost like an authority figure lurking over one’s shoulder, users are not obliged to do anyone any favours, which is

³⁷ Rheingold required assistance on removing a tic from his daughters head. In between phoning the paediatrician and the paediatrician phoning back, Rheingold had logged on to The WELL, posed the question, received the answer and removed the tic (Rheingold 1994:17).

why the topic of authenticity becomes important when discussing the trust issue on socially driven web sites and communities online.

O'Brien also draws on the idea of authenticity online, by discussing the threat of multiplicity on authenticity. Because of the uncertainty surrounding identity online and the ability to say one thing and be another, this idea of multiple identities threatens the authenticity of that person online and will therefore threaten the strength of ties within any relationship that could build up. She discusses the idea of theatre, where '... authenticity is seamless multiplicity' (1999: 92). Her point is targeted at two types of people who want to communicate through technology online. One believes cyberspace to be an alternative reality, where performance and variety are key (in relation to identity) and the other believes the advantage of electronic communications is 'simply a means to extend the range that this self can travel to meet others' (p. 93). The latter belief is in keeping with the idea that technology is advancing one's self as a real person and improving the ability to communicate with others '..."intact" as a "real person"(p. 93).

In terms of identity online, community is fragile and authenticity is complicated to achieve. The most efficient online systems occur where the material is authenticated and appears genuine in areas such as Facebook.com, with individual profiles based on real life details and events, and the famous WELL where people are utilising the system to help themselves and others. Even code repositories and other open source examples, where there is no likely chance of ever meeting the people that provide material for others to use, feels authentic as a community. This is down to knowing that the people are choosing to provide help and support, as opposed to having to provide it.

3.3. THE FUTURE FOR COMMUNITY

'From Kmart to Cybermart! Sic transit retail space?' (Mitchell 1996: 92)

If we consider the process of evolution for the workplace in terms of internet and network involvement, there is quite a broad separation of self from identity. Many contemporary communities after education would be based around those that we reside with or work with. This thesis has already speculated on the likelihood of interaction between

neighbours and believes the ties to be weaker, due to the social divides within complex urban communities today. So in terms of the work environment, the future may consist of weaker ties than before.

Mitchell considers the implications of technology on the entire working day process, from commuting by car or public transport, working within an office space with fellow workers, the public space available for lunch breaks and finally the commute home again. These systems were in place because of the need for face to face interaction and to be where the work and technology are. Contemporary technology and advanced telecommunication systems has 'greatly weakened the adhesive power of these former imperatives, so that chunks of the old structure have begun to break away...' (1996: 94).

Mitchell states that 'much information work that was traditionally done at city centre locations can potentially be shifted back to network-connected, computer-equipped suburban or even rural homes' (1996: 96). Major companies have shifted back office workers to obscure locations in the countryside and many small businesses are operated from the rural home, with an influx of working for one's self and 'working from home' in contemporary work culture. Thanks to communications and technology, virtually any computing or information work can be done from any location with an internet connection. Mitchell draws on James Martin and Adrian Norman, who suggested way back in the 1960's that 'we may see a return to cottage industry, with the spinning wheel replaced by the computer terminal' and that 'in the future some companies may have almost no offices' (p. 96). It is entirely possible that rural traditional community could be renewed by advancing technology, with less of a need to commute to offices for work. Essentially advanced communications and the cyber community culture that has grasped contemporary websites and persons could strengthen the local community by establishing more home based workers, who live and work in their local community.

Peter Drucker's *Introduction: Civilizing the City* introducing the book *The Community of the Future*, has a very clear message: 'Only the institution of the social sector, that is, the non-government, non-business, non-profit organisation, can create what we now need, communities for the citizens' (1998: 06). According to Drucker only non-profit

organisations can provide the diversity of community required. In relation to authenticity and trust issues online, this is a true reflection of the success of community through contemporary code repositories and open source platforms.

When discussing the future of community, it is important to consider the current youth, born in the late 20th century. This generation has grown up with modern technology and online communities being alongside the real world communities. Essentially, the lives of many children have been technologically influenced by advancing communications to the point where some may not ever interact with other children in the community. A large network of children's friends may even come from networked game stations with multiple platforms supporting network game play, taking the physical person out of playing multi-player. Many of the recent gaming systems available to buy, such as the Sony Playstation 3 (PS3) or the XBOX 360 are already set up for network connections and online game play³⁸.

It is entirely possible that traditional community for this generation may not exist except online, if the youth are not participating in the physical community around them, such as after school clubs, local teams or scout groups. Relying too much on the community that presents itself online, without developing community within the real world is what could disrupt or even destroy community for the future.

Richard F. Schubert and Rick R. Little in *Our Children Are the Community of the Future* suggest that whatever angle people choose to look at the future from, the bottom line is this: 'wherever we live, the quality of *how* we live will depend very much on the investment we make in young people today' (1998: 249). The investment may well need to ensure an adequate supply of traditional community for young people in parallel with advancing technology. There are obvious dangers in transferring everything about ourselves to digital format. This is discussed by numerous authors including Mitchell who focuses on the access to personal data online and in relation to possible existing privacy violation (1996: 158-159). A larger danger is having everything online from the start with no physical grounding anywhere. This would mean online community representing tradition to the

³⁸ As a current user of the PS3, I confirm that the networking features are available with most games as standard.

youth of the future with our children's children being brought up not in the presence of a physical community of likeminded young people, but alongside an interface that is designed to replicate friends and experiences.

It is entirely possible that if we continue to pursue the dream of converting everything in life to a digital format (community included) and developing as much as possible in open source, that traditional community could be destroyed.

Schubert and Little discuss the fears of virtual colonisation by popular Western culture in relation to the information age, stating that 'there is no need to shoot the messenger. What we need to do is change the message' (1998: 243). In terms of technology, this statement could be interpreted to show that advancing technologies would not cause traditional community's destruction but the providers of the community itself could, which Goriunova and Shulkin support by stating: 'Despite the distinctness of the community, it is the people who build the platform and make it work, whether by contributing ... or ... participating otherwise' (2006: 259-260).

This final chapter discussed the idea of online communities as real communities. It examined the question of whether or not online communities replace real communities and established that they do not necessarily replace communities in the real world. This chapter also investigated the participants in online communities and the specific issue of trust and identity in making community possible online. Finally this chapter speculated on the future of community and whether or not technological developments are a major threat to community within the real world. Rather than developing technology threatening, it was established that a potential threat may be the people involved in creating community. It also further proved that online community can support traditional communities and have a positive impact on society.

CONCLUSION

The community feel received from certain situations online is powerful enough that for some it constitutes real community. Will it ever replace traditional face to face community? It is unlikely, but contemporary social networking sites and online communities have been shown to work very efficiently in conjunction with the real world as long as there is some kind of physical starting point.

The thesis discussed the separate definitions of traditional and online communities. It was established that community did not have to be confined by time or place and this opened the way for community to exist more remotely. Therefore it was possible to discuss an expanded definition of community that encompassed the online community as well. Since online communities would not exist without some common purpose between the people who inhabit them, the fundamental requirement for a community would appear to be satisfied.

Further to this, it was established that rather than posing a potential threat to traditional community, online communities can actually improve relations in the real world, especially those that are weakened by distance or lack of face to face interaction. Online community was also shown to assist people in their everyday lives in the form of online advice, tutorials and various forums for open discussion as well as the open source culture, a major development in the 'Participation Age'³⁹.

The final chapter discussed the idea of online communities as real communities and established that the online community does not currently and will not necessarily replace traditional community in the future. Having speculated on this future and whether or not technology is a major threat to community within the real world, it was established that if there was any threat at all, it may be the people involved in creating the community itself.

³⁹ Sun Microsystems – Free and Open Source Software (link: <http://www.sun.com/software/opensource/benefits.jsp>)

For a lot of us the community aspect is not necessarily online. It is purely a physical community that has spread its communication system to online technology to assist in the functioning of that community in real life. Facebook is a prime example of this, where users add existing friends to learn more about them and communicate with them in between face to face meetings. The users that try to add new friends based on friends of friends or social similarities may think of Facebook.com as an opportunist technology, to make new friends in cyberspace, and then perhaps have friends merge from this technology in to the real world for them.

It is clear that successful contemporary online communities bare more than a striking resemblance to traditional communities. Following the pen and paper, the telephone, the radio and the television, new technologies are now being utilised as a communications tool in the same way that the motor car and the rail and road networks developed and expanded communities in the real world.

Essentially connecting people is one of the most successful aspects of the Internet and the relationship that users can create with others online is just as important as the medium, if not more so. Online community has been successfully created, not as a physical invention but as a social invention thanks to the progression of technology and it will continue to be available for people to use in to the future as more and more emphasis is placed on participation for development.

The success and maintenance of traditional community in the real world will depend on how we continue to make use of technology as a form of community online for the younger generation. If it is pushed as a separate and somewhat more efficient communication tool there may be almost no need to meet anyone in person. If online communities can continue to be utilised in conjunction with community in the real world, which is something current social networks and platforms do well, then traditional community in the real world should never be threatened.

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