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Community and the Internet

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Defining the Undefinable

Even prior to research on Internet communities, the concept of "community" posed a problem for scholars. Rather than objectively describing a type of human group or association, it carries significant emotional baggage. Imagine trying to use it as an epithet. One might spit out the word "community" sarcastically to call into question the legitimacy of a *particular* group, but it is hard to imagine using the term to provide a straightforward negative evaluation. Community evokes empathy, affection, support, interdependence, consensus, shared values, and proximity. Real communities (however those might be defined) of course may contain all of these, as well as all of their opposites. This contradiction has had several effects on the study of communities, especially the study of online communities and other communities that intersect the Internet.

Community's feel-good fuzziness requires that scholars first grapple with its definition. The scope of community definitions ranges from the extremely minimalist to more elaborate lists of facets. For instance, the definition of "virtual community" offered on Wikipedia includes only two simple elements: (1) "a group of people," who (2) "interact via communication media" (Wikipedia, 2008). Porter's (2004) similarly simple definition of virtual community adds one more element: (1) "an aggregation of individuals," who (2) "interact" around a (3) "shared interest" (p. 3). While these definitions strip the word community of most of its usually understood meaning, they accord with conceptions of the term in the business world. This was especially true during the dot.com boom in the late 1990s, when many businesses became excited about online communities as potential marketing tools, and conceived of such communities as little more than groups of consumers who would gather and enthuse about specific products.

More recently, articles about online community oriented towards business interests address more than just marketing applications of virtual communities. However, definitions of community in those articles continue to emphasize

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communication as the central component of community. Ridings and Gefen (2006), who discuss virtual communities as "crucial to organizations that want to tap into their enormous information potential," provide a three-part definition, that includes: (1) "shared interests or goals," (2) a "sense of permanence," and (3) some sufficient degree of "frequency" of interaction (p. 2).

Scholars who, on the other hand, seek to identify the potential of the Internet for facilitating deeper human connections tend to emphasize relationships and values rather than communication and shared interests. Amitai Etzioni (2004) states that communities have "two elements": (1) "a web of affect-laden relationships" that are interconnected, and (2) "commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity" (p. 225). Strictly speaking, this sneaks in a good deal more than two elements, since having a shared history and identity is rather a different thing than having shared meanings, let alone shared values. In any case, Etzioni, a central figure in the communitarian movement, provides a definition of community with much more emotional heft. His focus on tightly woven webs of relationships that "crisscross and reinforce one another" (p. 225) follows a long tradition of conceiving of communities as tightly-knit and cooperative. This dates back at least to Tönnies' concept of *Gemeinschaft*, or community, conceived of in distinction to the more atomistic and anonymous experience of *Gesellschaft*, or society (Tönnies, [1887] 1979, as cited in Borgmann, 2004).

A third theme in scholarly writing on Internet communities concerns the design of online forums that could facilitate virtual community. When defining community, authors with this focus generally find it necessary to more explicitly list numerous facets of community in order to determine what aspects of system design correspond with those facets. Feenberg and Bakardjieva (2004) list five attributes of community, derived from sociology and philosophy: "(1) identification with symbols and ritual practices; (2) acceptance of common rules; (3) mutual aid; (4) mutual respect; [and] (5) authentic communication" (p. 5).

But with the emphasis on systems design, an exact definition of community itself fades in importance in favor of lists of requirements for the systems that would support community. After their discussion of the definition of community, Feenberg and Bakardjieva (2004) quote Mynatt and colleagues' (1998) list of five "affordances" that "span the various technologies used in Internet-based communities": persistence, periodicity, boundaries, engagement, and authoring (pp. 130–32). Similarly, Porter (2004) suggests a typology of virtual communities that includes five "attributes": (1) "purpose (content)," (2) "place (extent of mediation)," (3) "platform" (system design), (4) "population interaction structure (pattern of interaction)," and (5) "profit model" (p. 8). While seemingly abandoning the difficult philosophical task of defining communities in order to get to the important practical work of designing them, these lists of affordances or attributes nevertheless contain important assumptions about what communities are for. Porter's model, for instance, assumes that understanding virtual communities requires determining whether or not they "create tangible economic

value" (p. 7). Mynatt and colleagues' list of affordances emphasizes the quasi-physical construction of the virtual place as a communication space.

Some researchers suggest abandoning the term community entirely. This again is not a new strategy, as at least one urban sociologist suggested in the 1970s that community sociologists (somewhat paradoxically) should abandon the term that defined their subdiscipline (personal conversation with Lyn Lofland). Fernback (2007) similarly asserts that the "concept of online community . . . has become increasingly hollow as it evolves into a pastiche of elements that ostensibly 'signify' community" (p. 53). Rather than defining community *a priori*, Fernback takes a symbolic interactionist approach by interviewing participants about their own conceptions of their online group interactions. She finds that "participants in online groups possess incongruous understandings of the character of online social relations" (p. 57). While her respondents employ the term community to express the sense of "unity and support" (p. 62) they experience in their online groups, Fernback suggests that a more important, and elusive aspect is that of commitment.

Community versus Networked Individualism

Fernback found that online participants still use the term community, albeit idiosyncratically, to describe their online groups. However, Barry Wellman (2002) suggests that people, at least in developed nations, are abandoning communities in favor of "networked individualism." He asserts that this process pre-dates, but has been facilitated by, the Internet. In the condition of networked individualism, "[p]eople remain connected, but as individuals rather than being rooted in the home bases of work unit and household. Individuals switch rapidly between their social networks. Each person separately operates his networks to obtain information, collaboration, orders, support, sociability, and a sense of belonging" (p. 5). Rather than identifying with a single, close-knit community, each networked individual sits at the center of a set of personal networks. This analysis stems in part from Wellman's methodological approach, in which he uses social network analysis to study individuals, networks, and groups.

As is clear from its name, Wellman's concept "is highly individualistic in nature," lacking "the sense of collectivity" found in earlier conceptions of community (Fernback, 2007, p. 54). Gurstein (2007), however, argues that this conception of individuals paradoxically strips them of any agency. "Within Wellman's model of 'networked individualism,' the only ontological mover (independent agent or source of independent action/agency) is the network itself" (p. 19). Gurstein further views networks as susceptible to centralized control and asserts that communities, as independent ontologies, continue to provide a basis for group action in opposition to networked control.

Gochenour (2006) provides a view of individual online participants similar to Wellman's, but derived from the completely different theoretical perspectives of

cognitive science and systems theory. He wishes to "shift thinking about 'online communities' away from specific [virtual] places and practices, and toward thinking about 'distributed communities' as arising from nodes . . . connected by a communications infrastructure" (p. 47). He presents a view of the self as coming "into being only through the field of social relations" (p. 39). In short, the networks create the nodes. Despite this, Gochenour sees these networks as "nonetheless communities that give members the ability to work together in taking action" (p. 46), but only as long as they continue to have Internet access.

Postill (2008), on the other hand, advocates abandoning both "community" and "networked individualism" as analytical terms. Like Fernback, he finds community useful only "as a polymorphous folk notion," rather than as an analytical concept (p. 416). Following Bourdieu, Postill suggests that social network analysis relies too much on "interaction as the basis of human life," failing to take account of "the invisible network of objective relations" (p. 418). Postill recommends a grounded "social field" analysis, open to different forms of sociality.

Whatever the implications of networked individualism for personal agency and group action, there is some empirical evidence in support of Wellman's characterization, at least with regard to online interactions. Both Hodkinson (2007) and Kendall (2007) find that LiveJournal users, with their interlinked personal diary-style blogs, follow more individualistic patterns of interaction than participants in previous online communities on forums such as newsgroups and MUDs (multi-user dungeons/domains). Hodkinson studied members of a Goth subculture who moved from discussion forums to LiveJournal. He suggests that "the use of interactive online journals can be expected to encourage patterns of interaction that are significantly more individually-centered than has been observed in the case of many discussion forums" (p. 646). Previously, interactions amongst this group had occurred in an online forum in which shared norms were adopted and policed. However, once the group moved to LiveJournal, "rather than occurring in the context of shared space in which behaviour and content is governed primarily by group norms, the majority of interactions take place on the personal territory of one individual and are initiated, centred around and regulated by that individual" (p. 632).

Kendall (2007) similarly found that the existence of each LiveJournal as a single participant's own personal space suppressed dialogue among participants, despite their expressed desire to use LiveJournal to increase their social interaction. "LiveJournal participants seek connection with others. LiveJournal theoretically provides several tools that facilitate such connections. But its structure as a linked set of individually controlled journals mitigates against the kinds of connection and feedback people seek" (p. 20). LiveJournal users express two contradictory desires. On the one hand, they seek the networked individual's autonomous control of their own nodal space. On the other hand, they still desire meaningful interpersonal connections, which can only come from autonomous others, freely contributing to a group dialogue. In a fully networked individualistic world, it is unclear where this dialogue could occur.

Real Communities versus Pseudocommunities

Debates about the definition or usefulness of the term "community" concern the central questions of the kinds of bonds we form, and the ways those bonds change as we blend our offline lives with online interactions. Discussions of online communities or of the effects of the Internet on both online and offline communities, rest on a long history of concerns with the fate of communities. Wellman (1979) identifies three strands in these discussions: "community lost," "community saved," and "community liberated." As he discusses, works based on Tönnies' distinctions between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* imply that community is being lost to the inexorable progression of modernity, leaving us isolated and anonymous. In reaction, many urban scholars developed the "community saved," argument through documenting vibrant urban communities. Wellman argues, however, that these studies fail to capture the important ties that people maintain outside of the densely local groups studied by the "saved" researchers. In his "community liberated" argument, he makes the case for a social network approach to the study of community in order to capture people's densely knit sets of strong ties as well as their more far-flung networks of weak ties.

The considerable body of research that documents new and vibrant forms of community and connections has failed to dispel the popularity of the "community lost" argument. Both academic and popular discourse abound with nostalgic claims concerning the kinds of connections we used to have, and the dire consequences of their loss. This leads to two responses among Internet community researchers and chroniclers. Some suggest that the Internet will restore to us the community we have lost. Rheingold (1993), for instance, describes a "hunger for community," created by the disappearance of informal public spaces, that drives people to create virtual communities (p. 6).

Others insist that the Internet merely continues previous processes of increasing isolation and anomie, or perhaps even makes them worse. Barney (2004) argues that "digital technology impoverishes rather than enriches our shared reality . . . so far as the concrete material foundations of community are concerned" (p. 32). Similarly, Borgmann (2004) claims that the Internet cannot foster what he calls "final communities" – "communities [that] are ends rather than means" . . . and "groups of people where one finds or works out one's reason for living" (p. 63). This is so because "the Internet is culturally commodifying by its nature," reducing people to "glamorous and attractive personae" (p. 64).

Borgmann's argument resonates with popular conceptions of Internet interactions as not truly social. Cultural biases against online socializing persist, despite the continually increasing numbers of people who participate in online interactions. People with active online lives nevertheless "appear ardent to distance themselves from what they may perceive to be the stereotype of the introverted internet user" (Fernback, 2007, p. 60). Researchers are also mindful of the possibility that, even offline, not everything that looks like a community necessarily

is one. Jones (1995) discusses the concept of pseudocommunity, as defined by a lack of sincerity and commitment. Similar work by the sociologist Bellah and colleagues (1985) distinguishes between communities and "lifestyle enclaves," in which individuals are united by shared leisure interests rather than complex interdependencies.

These issues result in a tendency, especially in the early research on Internet communities, to focus on the question of whether or not online communities are "real" communities. Much of this research is valuable in that it details the richness of online interactions. However, it has led to a certain degree of wheel-spinning as researchers over and over feel it necessary to assert that online communities are indeed possible.

Virtual Communities

The earliest researchers of virtual communities came from several different academic disciplines, including anthropology, communication, linguistics, media studies, and sociology. But they shared in common the experience of being among the first within their discipline to explore the online world, often in the face of skeptical mentors and colleagues. Not surprisingly, most began their research on the online world as graduate students. Junior scholars were more likely to be drawn to the new world of online socializing, and most able to turn their scholarly careers toward the job of explaining that world. (Indeed, one of the earliest, and most-cited, treatises on online community, Elizabeth Reid's 1991 "Electropolis: Communication and Community on Internet Relay Chat," is an undergraduate honors thesis.)

Some of these early researchers had no experience with online interaction prior to being drawn there by research interests (Kendall, 2002). Others, in the ethnographic tradition of "starting where you are" (Lofland & Lofland, 1995), conducted their research on virtual groups in which they already participated (Cherny, 1999; Baym, 2000). Yet others created online communities to facilitate professional goals and interests, while incidentally also furthering a research agenda (Bruckman & Resnick, 1995; Bruckman & Jensen, 2002). The work of these early virtual community researchers focused on asynchronous forums like Usenet and The WELL, and on near-synchronous forums of MUDs and chat. These venues reflect the conditions of the time (the mid-1990s to early 2000s), when almost all communication over the Internet was text-based. Taken as a whole, research on virtual communities focuses on several key issues. These include the formation and demise of virtual communities; conflict, cooperation, and social control; and identity, including both the possibility for online identity deception, and the connection between offline social identities and online interactions.

Community Lifecycles

As a relatively new phenomenon, online communities don't have histories extending back for generations. Virtual community researchers frequently talk to still-active

community founders. Current participants have vivid memories of formative events; events with clear connections to current policies, activities, and conflicts. Such events provide insight into the ways communities form and cohere, and point to issues of interest to others hoping to form similar communities.

Cherny (1999) describes the history of *ElseMOO* and its relationship to the earlier *LambdaMOO* community. Founded by several people who had been active *LambdaMOO* participants, *ElseMOO* established many of its norms and practices through specifically differentiating itself from *LambdaMOO*. For instance, at the time *ElseMOO* began, *LambdaMOO* was in the early stages of building a democratic system of government heavily reliant on a petition process. *ElseMOO*, a much smaller group, was run more like a private club. Through the course of its life, *ElseMOO* continued to acquire members from *LambdaMOO*, especially older participants who felt that *LambdaMOO* had too many "newbies."

Kendall (2002) similarly describes the growth of *BlueSky* from several previous groups, and explains its continued relationship to other outgrowths of these groups, including *ElseMOO*. *BlueSky* participants characterized themselves as "crusty dinos," recognizing their relatively long-term participation in online communities, as well as their somewhat cantankerous interactional style. In keeping with this self-description, *BlueSky* participants tended to be critical of other communities, especially those they deemed silly. These included *LambdaMOO* and *FurryMUCK*, two other long-standing online communities. *BlueSky* participants considered *LambdaMOO* to be too full of clueless newbies and disdained the *FurryMUCK* practice of role-playing as anthropomorphic animals.

Communities thus often form in reaction to other available communities, with participants distinguishing their own identity and values from those of others. However, internal events can also be crucial to members' sense of themselves as constituting a community. Some of the earliest examples of this appear in the journalistic accounts of virtual communities by Rheingold (1993) and Dibbell (1993, 1998). Rheingold (1993) describes how events such as the suicide and funeral of a WELL participant brought other members together and highlighted for them the growing strength of their bonds. Dibbell's (1993) famous account of a "rape in cyberspace" demonstrates how negative events – in this case the abuse by a *LambdaMOO* participant of several other participants – force community members to consider issues of governance and conflict resolution. This can lead to a stronger feeling of community.

Relatively few accounts exist of the demise of virtual communities. Gatson and Zweerink's (2004) account of *The Bronze*, an online group of fans of the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, notes that communities fostered and controlled by corporate entities exist at the whim of those corporations. Cherny (1999) similarly describes a period when *ElseMOO* was shut down by one of its founders. Virtual communities require non-virtual hardware and software resources, and those resources may be controlled by one or a few members (as in the *ElseMOO* case), or by persons or groups completely outside of the community (as in the case of *The Bronze*). This can make virtual communities more vulnerable to disruption or dissolution than their offline counterparts.

Bruckman and Jensen (2002) provide one of the few detailed analyses of the demise of a virtual community. Bruckman and others founded *MediaMOO* in 1993 "to enhance professional community among media researchers" (Bruckman & Resnick, 1995, p. 1). For several years, it grew and successfully functioned as a site for collaboration and networking. However, by 1999 it was all but completely dead. Bruckman and Jensen identify several key contributing factors.

The *MediaMOO* founders originally assumed that community members would continue their participation indefinitely. But in Bruckman and Jensen's analysis, *MediaMOO* provided greater benefits to new scholars than to established researchers. *MediaMOO* also successfully fostered several groups that later split off to form separate communities. The resulting losses in membership from these two factors were not adequately compensated by the addition of new members. Bruckman and Jensen felt that encouraging new members would require more active participation by leadership, especially in acclimating new members and making them feel welcome.

Conflict, Cooperation, and Control

Depending on how it is managed, conflict can destroy communities. Virtual communities are particularly vulnerable to disruption by miscreant outsiders or disgruntled insiders. Yet, as described by Rheingold and Dibbell, conflicts can also foster community. Conflict can promote reflection and a growth in community identity. This can involve more explicitly spelling out norms and rules for behavior. Conflicts can also generate new mechanisms for social control. For these reasons, conflicts provide researchers with information about community values.

Stone (1992), describes the difficulties experienced by *CommuniTree*, a virtual community created on a bulletin-board system in 1978 (and thus predating most of the Internet-based virtual communities described here). In 1982, *CommuniTree* suffered from an influx of boys who jammed the system "with obscene and scatological messages," and found ways to " 'crash' the system by discovering bugs in the system commands" (p. 91). These problems were exacerbated by privacy policies which prevented administrators from viewing messages as they came in. Within months, *CommuniTree* became unusable. "Thus, in practice, surveillance and control proved necessary adjuncts to maintaining order in the virtual community" (p. 91).

Quittner (1994) recounts a similar incident when rec.pets.cats, a Usenet newsgroup, was invaded by participants on other newsgroups, including alt.tasteless and alt.bigfoot. In that case, participants were unable to access software in ways that threatened the continuation of the community. However, by spamming the list with disruptive and objectionable messages, they rendered normal conversations among participants impossible. The conflict also escalated to include threats to specific individual participants. Rec.pets.cats eventually recovered, in part through the use of technical features allowing users to block objectionable messages.

In her discussion of "conflict management in virtual communities," Smith (1999) describes numerous conflicts on *MicroMUSE*. *MicroMUSE* was an online community constructed for the purpose of science education for children, but allowed public visitors as well. Smith recounts several instances in which participants who committed severe transgressions were banned from the community – the ultimate sanction available in virtual communities. As in the case of *CommuniTree*, the actions of these transgressors threatened the continued operation of the software that allowed the community to exist, as well as disrupting the work of others. But, though banned, the transgressors were able to return through the exploitation of technical loopholes in the software.

Smith argues that virtual communities "must include diversity and find some way to integrate it if they are to thrive" (1999, p. 160), but diversity results in conflict. She notes that "to survive, virtual communities must protect their primary resources" (p. 143), and must therefore find ways to manage conflict before it escalates such that it harms the community as a whole. However, the imposition of sanctions is complicated by the inability to confront transgressors face-to-face, and the difficulty in keeping specific transgressors out, while still enabling the influx of new participants.

Not all conflicts originate from malicious outsiders. Communities can also suffer conflicts among members. Kendall (2002) recounts a disagreement among several *BlueSky* participants that resulted in one participant permanently leaving the group. This caused some soul-searching amongst the remaining participants. "[A]ny departure, especially a rancorous one, disturbs the harmony of the group and reminds people of the fragility of online relationships. . . . The rehashings and evaluations of the event helped people repair the breach in the group and reassure themselves of the group's continuation" (p. 177).

Such internal conflicts often stem from power differences among members. On *ElseMOO*, conflicts emerged from a complicated mix of factors. Contributing was the fact that only some participants had the ability to contribute to the creation of the community environment through programming its software. Participants who could program, including the founding members of the community, could dispense that ability to others. However, they tended to do so sparingly and somewhat arbitrarily. This fostered feelings of exclusion among non-programming participants. Another factor leading to conflict was the fact that some of the earliest *ElseMOO* participants lived in close proximity and were able to conduct their relationships face-to-face as well as on *ElseMOO*, leaving other participants feeling left out.

No one engaged in malicious hacking, or bombarded the others with offensive messages. However, ill-will and arguments increased to the point that the founder – and, importantly, the person upon whose computer the community existed – felt it necessary to temporarily shut the community down. It returned later with a reorganization that attempted to share power among a wider group of users. This reorganization was only partly successful in mitigating the interpersonal tensions on *ElseMOO*. Cherny notes that "if it's ultimately the community

itself that deserves protection, it is never clear just who the community is . . . Boundaries are continually being negotiated, expressed in dynamic symbolic language and evolving community policies" (Cherny, 1999, p. 273).

Not all virtual communities experience these kinds of conflicts, and conflict is not necessarily required for the formation of close community bonds. In her description of rec.arts.tv.soaps (r.a.t.s.), Baym (2000) describes the ways in which r.a.t.s. participants actively construct r.a.t.s. as a community in which friendliness is a core value and expected behavior. They do this through several conversational strategies, including (1) qualifying their expression of points of disagreement, (2) aligning themselves with other participants through partial agreement, and (3) moving conversations away from disagreement and back to the core activity of the group: the interpretation of soap operas.

Identity

Communities do not exist without some sense of community identity among participants. As Anderson (1991) notes in his study of nationalism, "all communities . . . are imagined" (p. 6). Community exists through people's imagined bonds to others whom they identify as members of the same community. Thus community confers identity, and participant identities also play an important part in the formation and continuation of communities. In studies of virtual communities, scholars have discussed identity in several different ways. One concerns the greater ability of virtual community participants to mask their identity. Another concerns the intersection of various facets of social identities – especially race and gender – with norms and values of virtual communities.

Donath (1999) points out that "knowing the identity of those with whom you communicate is essential for understanding and evaluating an interaction" (p. 29). But in both text-based and graphical virtual worlds, much more than in face-to-face encounters, it is possible to mask identity, or to present a deliberately deceptive identity. (Since online identities are by definition mediated, people may also present identities they feel represent their true selves, but that would not be so evaluated by their interlocutors.) Early research was particularly caught up with this aspect of online life. Some lauded the ability to masquerade online as leading to a postmodern understanding of the self as multiple and socially constructed (Turkle, 1995). Others worried about the potential harm to virtual communities (Donath, 1999).

Tales of identity deception have taken on an almost mythical quality in writings about the Internet. The same stories are told over and over as cautionary tales to inoculate the unwary. One such tale is that of "Julie," a "totally disabled older woman" who turned out to be "a middle-aged male psychiatrist" who wanted to engage in conversations with other women as a woman (Stone, 1992, pp. 82–3). In the early MUD communities, participants warned each other about men who represented themselves as women online, engaged in netsex with other men, and then humiliated them by posting logs of the encounters on public forums.

Donath (1999) discusses a slightly different form of deception, that of trolling. Trolls represent themselves as serious members of the community, but then attempt to disrupt the community by baiting participants. The rec.pets.cats "invasion" described above occurred in the form of such trolling. As discussed both in Donath and in Herring and colleagues (2002), trolling harms communities in two ways: (1) causing community members to engage in fruitless and frustrating arguments, and (2) creating a loss of trust. Kendall (2002) and Herring and colleagues (2002) also point out the gendered nature of trolling, in which the trolls are often male and the victims most often female.

The extent of online identity deceptions is impossible to gauge, but researchers of online community find that in most long-standing communities, deception is minimized. The formation of community depends upon consistent identities. Participants come to know each other, even if only through pseudonyms, and often seek to connect offline as well as online. Kendall (2002) presents several examples of *BlueSky* participants who abandoned their initial identity masquerades, either because they wanted to meet people face-to-face, or because they tired of the deception. Borgmann (2004) suggests that "in the end and deep down . . . we crave recognition, the acknowledgement of who we are in fact" (p. 59).

However, not all online identity ambiguity is intentionally produced. The communication limitations of online forums can make it difficult to be sure of the identities of all participants. As Baym (1995) says about participation on newsgroups, "people never know who all the readers of their messages are" (p. 145). Kendall (2002) reports incidents in which people were confused by "robots" (characters run by computer programs rather than people), or encountered people they knew in other forums under other names. This sometimes leads people to attempt to pin down others' identities. On *BlueSky*, where people could log in anonymously as "guests," participants harassed guests who were deemed overly cagey about their identity (Kendall, 2002, pp. 129–35).

Despite these difficulties, most people in virtual communities wish to represent themselves in consistent and realistic ways. People do manage to perform consistent identities online. Among other things, this means that the aspects of identity that some hoped would become insignificant online – such as race, class, and gender – remain salient. Burkhalter (1999) details the ways in which Usenet participants perform racial identities, and evaluate – and dispute – the racial representations of others. Nakamura (2002) analyzes the phenomenon of "identity tourism," in which virtual community participants reinforce racial stereotypes through taking on the identity of exoticized others.

Although not focusing specifically on the issue of community, Susan Herring's work has been among the most influential in addressing the issue of gender identity online. She and her associates have analyzed many different aspects of gendered communication online, including: men's language online (Herring, 1992), gender differences in values leading to different online conversational styles (Herring, 1996), men's expectations about and reaction to women's online participation (Herring et al., 1995), and harassment of women online (Herring, 1999).

Her meticulous, prodigious, and early work in this area make it clear that gender does not disappear online simply because people communicating through text cannot see each other's bodies.

Later work on gender in online communities confirms Herring's findings. Kendall (2002) found that *BlueSky* participants brought their offline understandings and expectations about gender to their online interactions. As in people's offline relationships and communities, *BlueSky* participants enacted and constructed gender identities through their online interactions, asserting gendered identities, and, in some cases, arguing about what gender means.

With commercial interests added to the mix, gender becomes an important aspect of the creation and marketing of virtual community. Cooks, Paredes, and Scharrer (2002) analyze women's participation on "O Place," an online community on Oprah.com. While they find that the site does provide a forum in which women can connect with each other for mutual support and community, this occurs "within the topical confines of the talk show and the magazine" (p. 155). Advertisers can thus be assured of a particular demographic to target. This makes the meaning of community in this case ambiguous, and calls into question the ability of the site to better the lives of women in general, beyond providing a supportive space for individual women.

How commercial entities structure their sites has important ramifications for the possible emergence of community. Gustafson (2002) examined three different online sites geared towards women, and found that these sites provided only "a simulation of community" (p. 183). Through discursive framing, and various strategies for social control of users, each of the sites she analyzed "firmly frames women in the traditionally feminine role of consumer" (p. 183). While the sites bring people together, they merely masquerade as communities. Through hierarchical control by people who are not themselves members, they hold out the promise of community in order to gather information about members for marketing purposes.

Community On- and Offline

Most communities connected through the Internet involve both online and offline components. Even in virtual communities that primarily exist online, participants often seek to meet one another face-to-face. Meanwhile, many offline groups seek to enhance their communities through online participation. In recent research on community and the Internet, the emphasis is shifting from ethnographic studies of virtual communities, to studies of people's blending of offline and online contacts.

A key question in this research has been whether online participation helps or harms offline communities. In the face of what some have analyzed as a general decline in community participation (Putnam, 1995), researchers have attempted to determine what role the Internet plays in this. Following Putnam's analysis, much of this research has concerned increase or decrease in "social capital."

For instance, Quan-Haase and colleagues (2002) used data from a National Geographic survey of website visitors to measure the effects of Internet participation on social capital. They used questions on the survey as indicators of three forms of social capital: (1) network capital (contact with friends, relatives, and co-workers), (2) civic engagement (participation in voluntary organizations and political activities), and (3) sense of community (a sense of community belonging). In general, their findings do not indicate that Internet interactions have much of an effect, either positive or negative, on these types of social capital. Internet interactions do not significantly decrease other forms of contact, and active Internet users report more positive feelings about *online* community. But participation on the Internet does not increase civic engagement or a sense of belonging to *offline* communities.

Kavanaugh and Patterson (2002) report similar results from their study of the Blacksburg Electronic Village. Like many offline communities, the town of Blacksburg, Virginia, sought to provide Internet access to its citizens and to encourage civic connections through the Internet. While the town's efforts did increase Internet access, as well as the use of the Internet for activities building social capital, these activities did not seem to increase community involvement or attachment.

In contrast to these reports, Hampton and Wellman (2002) found that Internet access and participation increased neighborhood connections for the residents of Netville, a newly constructed Canadian suburb in which some residents' homes came equipped with broadband network connections. Wired residents knew and communicated with more of their neighbors than non-wired residents. They even used these contacts to support collective action, although the actions observed were limited to very local concerns, including housing deficiencies and a dispute concerning the Internet access itself.

If community is in general decreasing, these reports suggest that growing Internet participation provides no solution. On the other hand, they also do not support the idea that the Internet itself is a force destructive of community. Online communities, however defined, seem to be thriving. If, as Borgmann (2004) argues, such communities are not "final communities," and thus can never really fulfill our need for community, this is not necessarily good news. But as Borgmann points out, "there is no good social science evidence about the emotional effects of prolonged socializing in cyberspace" (p. 65). We don't have longitudinal studies of online communities, and there are only a few studies that look at very long-term users, except to determine if they engage in different kinds of online activities than less experienced users.

Future Directions

Future studies of Internet and community need to close the gap Borgmann identifies and analyze people's Internet participation over time. Are they, as Wellman (2002) argues, turning from communities to networked individualism? We need

to investigate further whether, as Wellman claims, this is an inevitable progression, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of the growing phenomenon of networked individualism. Hodkinson's (2007) and Kendall's (2007) studies suggest that system design also has an impact on the level of individualism in online groups, and the extent to which this interferes with interpersonal bonds. We need to look not just at how to design systems to foster community, but at the community definitions embedded in those designs as well as the ramifications these definitions have for use.

System design also figures in the question of control versus connection that I noted in my work on LiveJournal (Kendall, 2007). There is a fundamental contradiction contained in our needs and desires that cannot ever be fully resolved, but that is definitely affected by what technologies we employ and how we use them. Each of us wants to be able to control how others perceive us and to control how and when we communicate with them. But the more control we exert, the less we are likely to receive the kind of close and spontaneous connections that we also desire. LiveJournal participants want to receive more comments in their journals, but are reluctant to leave comments in journals controlled by others. I have seen these same issues arise in interviews recently conducted with college students (for research in progress) about their cell phone use. Students often screen calls but are unhappy when they suspect their calls are being screened by others. The degree and type of control that different communications systems afford can affect the balance between these competing desires for control and connection and thereby directly impact the ability to form or enhance communities.

Good work continues to be done on how people perform particular identities online, on what these identities mean, and on what these performances tell us about identity (gender, race, age, etc.) in general. There is room for more of this kind of research. However, we also need studies that push beyond such questions as, for instance, whether gender matters online (of course it does), and whether online gender performances reify or call into question existing hegemonic conceptions of gender. (Some do one, some the other, but why? And in what circumstances?) We also need studies that take a broader look at how the Internet and related media technologies intersect with our conceptions of identity and our very sense of self. Are, for instance, changes occurring in how we conceive of gender, of what gender means in society, and of the gendered balance of power? If so, what role do new media play? If not, why do the new forms of sociality afforded by new media *not* effect such changes?

This approach applies to community as well as identity. Fernback (2007) argues that participants' own conceptions of the meaning of community are so contradictory that analyzing online participation in terms of community no longer makes sense. This introduces the question of how to determine the boundaries of research into community and the Internet. If participants themselves present contradictory notions of community, it might or might not make sense to limit a study to the boundaries of a specific group. This is particularly so since individuals may participate in numerous "communities," both online and offline. Yet

adopting a strictly social network analysis approach risks reifying or even valorizing individualism. (For further discussion of the boundaries of research projects, see "Question One," in Markham & Baym, 2009.)

Wellman is right to caution against a nostalgic view of community that fosters the assumption that modern life is increasingly depriving us of strong interpersonal bonds. But we need more studies of the kinds of commitments and connections people form and the ways these relationships intersect communications technologies. These investigations need to go beyond the already difficult-to-answer questions of increases or decreases in social capital and community involvement. We need a better sense of (1) how people function in modern society, (2) whether some forms of social organization foster better, more fulfilling, lives than others, and (3) how we might intervene to create such forms of social organization. The answers to these questions concern what makes us human. At issue are our identities, relationships, commitments, and obligations, our personal and social needs and our sense of support and belonging.

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