Reconfiguration of Communities in Cyberspace

SungBok Park
Hanyang University, Korea

Ha Sung Hwang
Hanyang University, Korea

INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of new forms of communities in cyberspace, many scholars have attempted to define the nature of those communities—online, cyber, and virtual. Within the social sciences, online, cyber, and virtual communities are used interchangeably as new forms of community in cyberspace. Due to the lack of agreement on the definition of those terms, many studies fail to explain their unique nature (or characteristics).

This is because social constructs—technologies and environments—surrounding the definition of the terms continually change and evolve, while new social, cultural, and political phenomena related to the changing social technologies and environment keep springing up. In this context, many communities in cyberspace are likely to be connected to off-line reality through multiple nonvirtual media or channels, such as telephone, letters, face-to-face communication, or off-line gatherings. Others, however, have no connection to off-line reality but simply alternate between virtual media or channels such as e-mails, instant messenger, chatting, or bulletin boards. Such different types of communities in cyberspace raise an important issue—how can we define the concept of community in cyberspace when it interplays with off-line reality?

Given that situation, this article aims to clarify the concepts of communities in cyberspace—online, cyber, and virtual—within the blurred boundaries between online life and off-line reality. By distinguishing it from cyber or virtual communities, we propose a new definition of online community. More specifically, online communities to be explored in this study are those in which online social interaction formed in cyberspace shifts away from cyberspace and into off-line reality (i.e., those online communities associated with a place by means of off-line gatherings). On the other hand, virtual or cyber communities comprise social interactions confined to cyberspace so that no connection between online social interaction and off-line reality can be found. Therefore, the distinction between online communities and cyber (or virtual communities) lies in the "condition" of interplay between online life and off-line reality. The distinction between online community and cyber (or virtual) community will help us understand the unique role each community plays in our lives within the blurred boundary between online and off-line.

BACKGROUND

Since the middle of the 1990s, the rapid spread and wide reach of the Internet has been dramatically transforming the way people are forming groups and engaging in their social activities. In spite of occasional frustrations, people have enjoyed the opportunity to experience online community life, in which new types of communal and interpersonal bonding, new forms of experiencing human contact, and new forms of social existence take place. Just as the growth of computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies has brought a new set of possibilities for interpersonal and community formation, it is an undeniable fact that with the emergence of online components (e.g., the bulletin board, e-mail, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), instant messenger (IM), or Weblog) in online communities, the Internet and its various applications are becoming more and more indispensable to everyday life.

However, in the struggle to discover the meaning of their online community and interaction in cyberspace, online community members attempt to connect their online life with off-line reality. Many community members in cyberspace participate in events ranging from

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person-to-person encounters to large, regular off-line gatherings, where several, even hundreds, of community members gather for events, discussions, and enjoyment at the same time and in the same place.

For instance, with the popularity of online communities in Korea, the new social phenomenon—*bungae*—emerged. Since 1996, *bungae* has became a popular social activity among Korean online users as Korean Internet users enjoy making new friends through online communities and meeting them in off-line reality. *Bungae* is an instant and spontaneous off-line face-to-face social gathering of groups of people at a predetermined place and time. While online community members enjoy chatting with each other, they suddenly arrange an impromptu meeting and go off-line. *Bungae* is named after such a quick and unscheduled arrangement for off-line meeting among online community members. Notices related to holding off-line flash gatherings are spontaneously posted by a member on an assigned bulletin board in which the gathering date, place, and purpose are indicated. Then, members post their replies, indicating if they will attend or not. In many cases, however, an attendance notice is not required.

Through off-line flash gatherings, the virtual relationships among Korean online community members develop into off-line relationships. A common purpose for these off-line flash gatherings is to strengthen the mutual friendships and personal relationships already formed in cyberspace through online interaction.

In Western societies as well, *flash mobs* exemplify this interplay of online life and off-line reality. The *flash mob* is a recent social phenomenon that began in the United States in 2003 and is now spreading throughout the world. It is the instant gathering of groups of people at the same time and in the same place in off-line reality coordinated through such CMC as e-mail, bulletin board systems (BBSs), *flash mob* Web sites, or instant messengers. *Flash mobs* resemble off-line flash gatherings in Korea. However, *flash mobs* are characterized by *random* group acts, not the meaningful and interpersonal encounters that characterize *bungae* in Korea. Anonymity still remains among *flash mob* participants. *Bungae*, however, constitutes a significant sociocultural phenomenon involving meaningful social interaction, with no analogue in the West.

Nonetheless, *Bungae*, *flash mobs*, and other related phenomena are the physical manifestation of the interconnectedness felt among online community members. Bakardjieva (2003) hints that the combination of online and off-line components in online interaction provide online participants with "real-life effects" like confidence and a sense of identity. Relationships formed in an online community are followed up with face-to-face contact. Thus, there is no distinct boundary between online and off-line reality. Some findings show the importance of integrating both components. Some studies show that communities in cyberspace may have a stronger sense of community when both online and off-line components are available (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Also people may have stronger interpersonal relationships when they have face-to-face interaction (Blanchard & Markus, 2002). Others expect the combination of the two components to be a catalyst for a higher level of interpersonal knowledge (Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999).

Where the blurring of boundaries between virtuality and physical reality causes ambiguity, off-line flash gatherings provide a starting point for a better understanding of the significance of the connection between them, in that the interplay makes it possible to consider cyberspace and online communities as natural extensions of off-line reality if virtuality and physical reality are truly connected. The reality of off-line flash gatherings and online social interaction in cyberspace may suggest that the cyberworld and the physical world are latently connected through human interactions.

Classification of Communities in Cyberspace

Before formally reconfiguring the concept of community in cyberspace, we will consider some grounds—Vililio's "symbolic window," Stone's "four epochs of virtual community," Hamman's three types of online community, and the genesis of community—in order to define various types of community in cyberspace within the blurred boundaries of online life and off-line reality, and reinforce the distinction between online community and virtual or cyber community.

The first two grounds involve illustrating that virtual space and virtual community are not analogous to cyberspace and cyber community. We speculate that three types of community—virtual, cyber, and online—can exist in the CMC environment—sometimes exclusively, sometimes inclusively. Hamman's (1998) analysis provides some insight on how a community in cyberspace can be categorized by its nature. He thus

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