

Chapter 8

Mixing Metaphors: Sociological and Psychological Perspectives on Virtual Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the theoretical and conceptual assumptions underlying the notion of virtual community. Drawing from relevant literature, the author first examines the fundamental properties of the Internet as both technological and cultural artifact and argues that the Internet can embody different technological, functional, and symbolic meanings that will have direct implications for how communities are formed and experienced. Building on that framework, the second part of the chapter focuses on the sociological and psychological bases of community and explores how such conceptions change with the emergence of the Internet. The author concludes that studies of virtual communities must be contextualized according to historical and existing patterns of social life and offers a discussion on new challenges and questions facing mass communications research in this increasingly interdisciplinary area.

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid diffusion of the Internet, new media technologies are transforming the ways we organize daily lives, conduct businesses, and participate in political activities. As a result, many traditional social and political constructs are increasingly being meshed with technological innovations to create new terms, such as cyber-culture,

hyper-text, and electronic-democracy. For social sciences research, this form of “convergence” may represent the best of times and the worst of times, as the pervasiveness of the Web has created a rich and fascinating interdisciplinary field of Internet studies, and yet the ever-changing technological environment challenges scholars to re-define what may have already been complex or contestable ideas. One of these problematic concepts is the notion of “virtual communities.”

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In the popular domain, virtual community is a term that can be used loosely to describe a variety of social groups interacting on the Internet, ranging from massively multiplayer online game (MMOG), online discussion forums, blogs, to a wide variety of social media sites or social networking sites. Despite its growing popularity in theory and in practice, there is no consensus regarding the appropriate definition or types of virtual communities (Porter, 2004). This difficulty is partly due to the ambiguous meaning of “community,” but it is also due to the different ontological and epistemological approaches used by scholars to examine the subject matter. Such challenge, however, should not deter researchers from pursuing a better and richer understanding of virtual communities. As Howard Rheingold (1993) once wrote, “perhaps cyberspace is one of the informal places where people can rebuild the aspects of community that were lost when the malt shop became a mall. Or perhaps cyberspace is precisely the *wrong* place to look for the rebirth of community, offering not a tool for conviviality but a life-denying simulacrum of real passion and true commitment to one another. In either case, we need to find out soon” (p. 26).

Heeding Rheingold’s call for further exploration, the purpose of this essay is to tease out some of the theoretical and conceptual assumptions underlying the notion of virtual community by mixing two important metaphors about community – that is, community as seen through the *sociological* and the *psychological* lens. The idea of a mixed metaphor involves using unrelated sources to make a senseless comparison. However, when scholars mix metaphors, it allows us to cross different disciplinary boundaries to examine the same issue under different lights. This essay hopes to do so by addressing the following research question from multiple theoretical perspectives: *How have conceptions of community shifted with the emergence of the Internet?* Drawing from relevant literature, I first examine the fundamental properties of the Internet as both technological and cultural artifact

and argue that the Internet can embody different technological, functional, and symbolic meanings that will have direct implications for how communities are formed and experienced. Building on that framework, the second part of the essay focuses on the sociological and psychological bases of community and explores how such conceptions might change with the emergence of the Internet. Finally, I conclude with a discussion on new challenges and questions facing mass communication scholars in the area of virtual communities.

THEORIZING THE INTERNET

Internet as Technology

The Internet itself was originally developed as a mechanism for national defense and can simply be treated in the literal sense as the hardware infrastructure that connects individual computers. However, after its rapid emergence and infiltration into public lives in the early 1990s, the Internet can now be defined as “the electronic network of networks that links people and information through computers and other digital devices allowing person-to-person communication and information retrieval” (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001). This view of the Internet as a “communication technology” is akin to what James Carey (1988) called the *transmission* view of communication, which emphasizes the idea of “imparting, sending, transmitting, or giving information to others” (p. 15). In other words, the Internet is no different from conventional mass media, such as print, radio, and television, in terms of its communicative purpose, but the ways in which such function is fulfilled (e.g., through a decentralized network) has sparked debates over whether the Internet may constitute a form of “new” media technology.

For example, some scholars (e.g., Barber, Mattson, & Peterson, 1997) have argued that individuals or marginalized groups can take ad-

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