

# Chapter 5

## Communities, Communication, and Online Identities

**Mikko Jäkälä**

*University of Jyväskylä, Finland*

**Eleni Berki**

*University of Tampere, Finland*

### ABSTRACT

*Social media and online communities offer increased possibilities for connection, interaction and participation but also new media with tools for self-presentation and identity management. Interacting anonymously or eponymously, having one, none or many identities online expresses richness in online communication. Contentious identities for communication are part of everyday online and offline interaction. The authors examine critically five types of online identity and analyse the differences, similarities, advantages, pitfalls, and disadvantages of using them. Examples illustrate the usage of these identity types, clarify possible misconceptions, and provide the reader with an improved understanding, increasing at the same time the usage awareness and knowledge on their distinctive features.*

### INTRODUCTION

The use of and the ways of using the Internet as a medium for connecting people with each other have changed in haste. Traditional online communities are more or less text-based discussion forums or discussion groups that serve as a platform for people who share thoughts and ideas on a common interest. These conventional forums and groups might have been exclusive for certain groups, and often required some level of skills, expertise and interest in technology. The rise of social media concentrated on the use of

technologies that were less technology-focused and more online communities' users-focused paying attention to the content they created and shared. Even though the technologies are basically same than before, social media can be seen as a new way of combining technologies, community users' activities and different users' communities and groups. (O'Reilly, 2005; Kangas, Toivonen & Bäck, 2007)

Online communities cannot just be built; only facilitated in order to provide people with interaction platforms where people could come and participate in or form a community of their choice.

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This alone emphasises the human factor within the design of cyberspaces. Online communities do not have physical borders but social life within these communities does have expression boundaries as well as norms and rules for behaviour on-line and sometimes also off-line. These boundaries for social actions and behaviour are either inherited by the structure of a certain e-space or different social media, i.e. discussion forums and social networking websites, or imposed by the designers and users of e-spaces. In order to be successful, online communities, e-spaces and other electronic congregations need regular users. Cyberspace does not exist without electronic inhabitants; otherwise it is a deserted cyber place. The sense of community is one of the important social features that shape both the social qualities of an online community as well as activities and behaviour of the community members. Sense of community is often described as a set of subjective experiences of belonging, mutual respect, and commitment that can be gained only through interaction and participation (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

The degree of success and functionality of virtual communities is incorporated and built through trustworthy group interaction (Werry & Mowbray, 2001). The rise of social software and online social networks impose new challenges for law, security and trust, identity and interaction (Kollock, 1999; Kimppa, 2007; Berki et al., 2007). The challenges go sometimes as far as to raise questions related to democracy and citizens' degree of participation in private or public online communities (Wilhelm, 2000). Online communities also challenge the concept of membership. Within digital worlds inclusivity and exclusivity have totally new semantics and terms of definitions with different application tools and membership management.

Entering cyberspace concerns issues of both *identity* and *identification*. The possibility to anonymously participate in online communities may ease the entrance to online communities. Some participants, though, may dislike anonymous

people. They may, however, gravitate towards digitally eponymous people welcoming them in an electronically-mediated social environment. This is probably the reason why social networking sites and other applications of social media are so popular: instead of just offering an online community, they bring community and its activities to daily life fit and handle mundane matters. To some extent identity in real life and cyber life can be seen as composed of same qualities. Applications of social media seem to intertwine identities while blending work and leisure time activities. Notwithstanding, questions of security, safety and trustworthiness are often only associated with cyberparticipants and their identities. In real life, though, identities are not that often questioned, authenticated or even doubted. Interestingly, new uses of technology also blur the division between online and offline.

Understanding online communities requires exploring the meaning of individual and collective identities, in particular how they are built and how they influence interaction and participation (Renninger & Shumar, 2002; Georgiadou et al., 2004). Arguably, the identity shared by community members should be empowering enough to facilitate participation and support communication. An overpowering group identity might block communication and create difficulties in promoting participation and innovative ways of thinking. A shared, cohesive identity, used by eponymous or anonymous people facilitates the development of mutual trust among the participants and balances communication within a group. On the other hand, a pseudonym or plenty of names may decrease certainty and control in interaction but still increase the willingness to communicate. Technology-mediated-communication is often seen as faceless and task-oriented (Berki & Jäkälä, 2009). However, it seems that communication in cyberspace may speed up initial interaction as well as self-disclosure, which, in turn, may facilitate interpersonal connections and relationships building (Walther, 1994; Walther and Burgoon,

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