

Development of IT and Virtual Communities

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INTRODUCTION

The notion of **community** is pivotal in the sociological tradition. According to Nisbet (1966), “the most fundamental and far-reaching of sociology’s unit ideas is community” (p. 47). Yet, it is not easy to define what a community is. Though in everyday life the concept of “community” is widespread, nonetheless this concept is very problematic in scientific reflections, partly because of its strongly interdisciplinary nature. As long ago as 1955, Hillery could list and compare 94 different definitions of “community,” finding only some common elements among them, such as social interaction, area, and common ties.

Generally speaking, a community can be defined as “a group of persons who share something more or less decisive for their life, and who are tied by more or less strong relationships” (Cantoni & Tardini, 2006, p. 157). It is worth noticing here that the term “community” seems to have only favorable connotations. As observed in 1887 by Ferdinand Tönnies, the German sociologist who first brought the term “community” into the scientific vocabulary of the social sciences, “a young man is warned about mixing with bad society: but ‘bad community’ makes no sense in our language” (Tönnies, 2001, p. 18; Williams, 1983).

Two main ways of considering communities can be singled out:

1. Communities can be intended as a set of people who have something in common, and
2. Communities can be intended as groups of people who interact.

The distinction between the two ways of conceiving a community is very well illustrated by an example provided by Aristotle. In his *Politics* (3.1.12), the Greek philosopher tells that, when Babylon was captured by an invading army of Persians, in certain parts of the city the capture itself had not been noticed for three days.

This is the reason why Aristotle considers Babylon not a *polis*, but an *ethnos*. In fact, according to Aristotle, what distinguishes the *polis*, that is, the perfect form of community (see *Politics* 1.1.1), from the *ethnos* is the presence of interactions and communications among the citizens. In a *polis* citizens speak to each other, they interact and communicate, while in an *ethnos* they just have the same walls in common.

In the sense of the *ethnos*, we speak, for instance, of the community of the linguists, of the community of Italian speaking people, of the open source community, and so on. The members of such communities usually do not know each other, they do not communicate each with all the others, but they have the perception of belonging to the community, they are aware of being part of it. According to Cohen (1985), such communities are symbolic constructions. Rather than being structures, they are entities of meaning, founded on a shared conglomeration of normative codes and values that provide community members with a sense of **identity**. In a similar way, Anderson (1991) defines the modern nations (the Aristotelian *ethne*) as “imagined communities”:

[They are] imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. [...] In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages or face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. (pp. 5-6)

Borrowing the linguistic terminology of structuralism (de Saussure, 1983; Hjelmslev, 1963), the two different typologies of communities can be named “paradigmatic” and “syntagmatic.” The former are characterized by similarity: members of paradigmatic communities share similar interests or have similar features. The latter, on the contrary, are characterized by differences: they are built up through the combina-

tion of different elements that carry out complementary functions, that is, through the succession of concrete interactions among the members (Tardini & Cantoni, 2005).

COMMUNITIES AND ICT

The concept of community is strictly related to that of “communication,” as it is shown by the common root of the words. Community and communication entail each other, being each a necessary condition for the existence of the other. On the one hand, communities are built and maintained through communicative interactions, which can take place both within a community and toward the outside. On the other hand, even a minimal form of community must exist in order to make any communicative event possible. Every communicative act presupposes that among the interlocutors a more or less extended common ground exists (Clark, 1996).

Communication technologies play a fundamental role in the relationship between communication processes and communities. From writing to letterpress print, from mass media to digital technologies, new “technologies of the word” (Ong, 2002) have always given rise to new forms of communities. **Virtual communities** are the new kind of communities that emerged thanks to ICT.

Two different situations that represent the relationship between social groups and new media can be singled out: on one side there are groups that have been created thanks to ICT, and on the other there are groups that already existed in the real world and employ ICT as a further communication tool. In the former case through ICT, social relations are created among people who had no previous mutual relationships; the community is *constituted* by employing the same medium. In the latter, already constituted groups, organizations, associations, and communities use new media and virtual environments to foster and increase their communication processes; media *facilitate* communities (Lechner & Schmid, 2000). The expression “virtual communities” in its original sense referred to communities constituted by the use of ICT.

Exactly as for the concept of “community,” it is very difficult to give a precise definition of what a virtual community is. We can supply a provisional definition of a virtual community as a group of people to whom interactions and communications mediated by ICT

play an important role in creating and maintaining significant social relations.

THE EMERGING OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

The term “virtual community” is attributed to **Howard Rheingold**, an American writer who in 1993 published a book that became a milestone in the studies on virtual communities. In this book, titled *The Virtual Community. Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Rheingold told his experience in the Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link (WELL), an **online community** created in 1985.

In defining virtual communities, Rheingold stresses the close connection that exists between them and **computer mediated communication (CMC)**. He defines virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold, 1993).

Other early definitions emphasize the importance of communicative interactions for the emerging of virtual communities. For instance, Baym (1998) defines them as “new social realms emerging through this on-line interaction, capturing a sense of interpersonal connection as well as internal organization” (p. 35). Fernback and Thompson (1995) stress also the spatial aspect of online communities and define them as “social relationships forged in cyberspace through repeated contact within a specified boundary or place (e.g., a conference or chat line) that is symbolically delineated by topic of interest.”

In early definitions of online communities, some features were acknowledged as constituent aspects of them:

- A shared communication environment
- Interpersonal relationships that emerge and are maintained by means of online interaction
- A sense of belonging to the group
- An internal structure of the group
- A symbolic common space represented by shared norms, values and interests (hence sometimes they are also called “communities of interest” [Clodius, 1997]).

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