Chapter II
Online Communities, Democratic Ideals, and the Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT

We examine some pros and cons of online communities with respect to two main questions: (1) Do online communities promote democracy and democratic ideals? and (2) What are the implications of online communities for information justice and the digital divide? The first part of the chapter will examine online communities in general and will attempt to define what we mean by "community" and more precisely, "online communities." It will then examine ways of building online communities, that is, what brings people together online. The second part of the chapter will look at the positive and negative contributions of online communities in light of democratic ideals and will address the issue of information justice and the digital divide. In examining these questions, we also consider the effects of the Internet for community life at both the local and global levels.

ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Before examining some of the pros and cons of online community life, we begin by elucidating the notion of a virtual or online community. First, however, we consider what *community* means in general.

What is a Community?

According to *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, *community* is defined as "people living in the same district, city, etc., under the same laws" (1996, p. 269). The first part of this definition stresses the geographical aspects

of community via an association with concepts such as *district* and *city*. In the past, community life typically was constrained by geographical limitations. In the 20th century, various forms of transportation, including the automobile, made it possible to extend, even if only slightly, the geographical boundaries of a community. However, traditional communities for the most part have continued to remain limited by physical constraints such as geography.

The advent of the Internet and the forms of social interaction it makes possible causes us to reexamine our thinking about the concept of a community. Individuals who are separated physically by continents and oceans can participate daily in electronic communities. As a result, more recent definitions of community tend to focus on the second part of the definition—"under the same law"—which can include common rules and common interests that one or more groups of people share, rather than on criteria involving geographical districts and physical constraints. In order for a community to exist, there must be some degree of shared beliefs, values, and goals among members who share a common vision and who desire to perpetuate it through the socialization of new members. Two values that traditionally have been associated with strong communities are trust and commitment.

We should point out that communities do not need to be homogenous in population, even though many are. Consider that, in many cases, individuals with diverse backgrounds participate and belong to communities because of their commitment to the shared values of the community, which often manifest themselves in a set of rules that embodies these beliefs.

What is an Online Community?

Howard Rheingold (2001) suggests that online communities can be understood as "computer-mediated social groups." He describes his initial experience in joining the WELL (the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), one of the earlier electronic communities, in which norms were "established, challenged, changed, reestablished, rechallenged, in a kind of speeded-up social evolution." The WELL was a community, Rheingold maintains, because of the kinds of social contracts and collaborative negotiations that happened in that setting. The WELL and other early electronic communities, including listservs, were instrumental in the initial formation of women's groups online. For example, WOW (Women on the Well) was a forum for women who belonged to the WELL, creating a community within a community. And SYSTERS-l, formed in 1990, was an early online community that supported women working in science and technology (Shade, 2002).

Michelle White (2002) notes that in cyberspace, the term *community* is a popular way of describing synchronous online settings because it suggests that they offer "social exchange, emotional support, and learning environments." Synchronicity, in this definition, can apply to location in cyberspace as well as to time, because, while chat rooms and instant messaging services—two forms of technology that facilitate online communities—are synchronous in terms of time and space, listservs and newsgroups are only synchronous in space and not time. (This point supports our emphasis on the latter part of the definition of community in the preceding section.) White also points out that describing online settings as communities acknowledges the "complex and important activities that people engage in through those sites." In effect, it also legitimizes these structures by making them seem as if they are physical and real.

Building Online Communities

In the preceding section, we noted that common interests can bring people together to form an online community. But what exactly are some of the common interests that define these individuals as members of a given community? Traditionally,

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