Chapter 8.13
Online Virtual Communities as a New Form of Social Relations:
Elements for the Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The generalization of the new information technologies has favored the transformation of social structures and the way of relating to others. In this changing process, the logic of the social relationships is characterized by the fragility and the temporality of the communicative systems reciprocity which are established "online" in a new cybernetic culture. "Virtual communities" are created in which the interaction systems established by individuals exceed the traditional categories of time and space. In this manner the individuals create online social webs where they connect and disconnect themselves based on their needs or wishes. The new online communication technologies favor the rigid norms of the "solid society" that dilute in flexible referential contexts and reversible in the context of the "global and liquid society" to which the sociologists Bauman or Beck have referred to. Therefore the objective that the authors propose in this chapter is to try new theoretic tools, from the paradigms of the new sociology of technology, which let them analyze the new relational and cultural processes which are being generated in the cultural context of the information global society, as a consequence of the new communication technologies scope. Definitely the authors propose to analyze the meaning of concepts such as "virtual community", "cyber culture", or "contacted individualism", as well as the meaning and extent of some of the new social and individual behaviors which are maintained in the Net society.

TOWARDS A MEANING OF "VIRTUAL COMMUNITY": A NEW STUDY OBJECT IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

The social dimension is one of the natural attributes of the human being, which must be understood as an individual person in interaction with a relational environment. Group, communities and culture are concepts which approach us to the man study in its complex network of social interaction as a social system. In this sense the plural evolution and interaction of the communities and the insti-

tutions as well as the forms of social relations and communication have shaped the history of humanity.

The community has been defined as a study object and subject from varied approaches, which comprise from the primitive forms of social association to the complex relationships of the post-industrial society in which the concept "virtual community" has emerged.

From the sociological point of view, community is a concept with a polysemous value, but as a global idea it responds to the anthropologic imperative of the social encounter and the need to create a sense and give shape to the human society. A possession feeling consolidates in it, understood as a psychological community feeling, in which one feels oneself as an active group member, which is decisive for the individuals own identity. Likewise, the feeling of a participation conscience and the link to a common territory are fundamental aspects (Gurrutxaga, 1991) (Pons Díez, J.; Gil Lacruz, M; Grande Gascón, J.M., 1996). The community is a network of social links, that can be based on a territory (a city), on common interests (associations, clubs) on similar characteristics of the individuals (Bar Association) or on an online platform (blogs, etc). Definitely, the community is an analytical category which defines human interaction as a constituent of the social reality, redimensioning the individual as a socialized person in a specific group, with social and symbolic representations and cultural values. Besides a social and anthropological approximation, we can consider the community as a context of action which contributes to the generation of realities based on symbolic truss.

The globalization and informationalization process has generated the transformation of our societies, including the space dimension. In such transformation the new space logic is characterized by the domination of a flow space, structured in electronic circuits that link themselves in the strategic nodes of production and management, which exceeds a space of places locally frag-

mented and the territorial structure as a way of daily organization. This new dimension takes us towards a Global City, understood as a "net of urban nodes of different levels and different functions, spreading all over the planet and that functions as the nervous center of Informational Economy. It is an interactive system to which companies, citizens and cities have to adapt themselves constantly. "(Castells, 1997: 2).

The Information Technologies are the fundamental instrument that allows the new logic of the social relationships to demonstrate themselves in reality. In them, Internet constitutes one of the most outstanding cases of the growing technological environment whose result has been the step from the Industrial Society to the Information Society (Cornella, 1997).

In the full expansion of Internet, the virtual communities are becoming a new social relationship format where the different communities turn to it to satisfy expectations and needs, to contribute its collaboration and to feel themselves as part of a great community. Unlike the Traditional Community, these impersonal spaces are characterized by the anonymity and the lack of human contact. These new relationship forms are giving way to a media society produced by a change of the social rules, by the capacity of transmitting ideology or by inducing behavior; definitely, by the generalization of a mass culture extensible to all social classes and communities. This turned Internet into a virtual community as means to unify the communications (Sánchez Noriega, 1997).

The first Virtual Communities were based mainly on the simple commerce or the sale of products through the Network, or on a web site where the users could place their personal webs freely. The current Virtual Community was born in this way, whose philosophy is based mainly on the leisure and recreation field, though it houses cultural societies or with certain scientific level: *Geocities[1]*. But the origin of these cyberspace centers is determined by the scientific communi-

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