

### Should we discuss cyber communities as 'real communities'?

The internet has become an everyday part of life for the majority of the contemporary society who have the technology and knowledge to access it, and as such new groups known as 'cyber' or 'virtual' communities have developed, living and growing on the world wide web, expanding simultaneously as is evident with real 'physical' societies found in our everyday lives. Is it ok then to discuss these in the same context as each other, or are they entirely different incarnations of human interaction that should be separated and therefore discussed at different ends of the equation that is community?

I want first to take a brief look at the history of the Internet, and how it offers the chance for cyber communities to develop. I will hopefully identify a framework for these cyber communities, which I will use to compare them against real life communities and then discuss the similarities and differences and so be able to draw a conclusion as to whether the two types of communities are able to be discussed in the same context.

The Internet's first appearance was in 1969 with the ARPANET computer network, run by the US Defense Department. The US Government was interested in creating a network that could withstand a nuclear attack. This system was the primary component of the super network that would eventually become the Internet. The first event of the Internet that we know today was in 1974, when Vint Cerf and Bob Khan defined the transmission control protocol (TCP) and Internet protocol (IP) by which information could be packaged addressed and sent to various destinations along a computer network. In 1983 this TCP/IP based Internet was launched across the USA, and has since developed to today's standards, of a global network of 43 million interconnected computers (Gauntlett 2000).

Presently, Internet technology enables several forms of interactive networking among users, including traditional activities suggestive of geographic communities, such as town meetings, exchanging information, discussing problems, and informal chatting. Forms of these communities include; Email, Multi-user Dimensions (MUDs), Chat channels (rooms) Conferencing systems/ Bulletin Board Systems (BBS)/ Information Services. These are just a handful of the most popular communication techniques widely available on the Internet. Access to the Internet and these services is provided through commercial Internet Service Providers (ISPs) such as America Online (AOL) that offer a range of

member services in addition to Internet access. The WELL provides a vivid example of the capability of online groups to facilitate sustained and meaningful interaction among members.

([http://www.harvardlawreview.org/issues/112/7\\_1586.htm#fn35](http://www.harvardlawreview.org/issues/112/7_1586.htm#fn35) Accessed 23/04/03)

The WELL is a large conferencing system, centered in the San Francisco Bay area; it was established in 1985 and has grown to become a vibrant online community where many topics and aspects of everyday life are discussed (Gauntlett 2000). Howard Rheingold has been actively interested in the topic of 'virtual (cyber) communities since the early days of the Internet and especially the topic of the WELL, I will use examples taken from his book *The Virtual Community* and other scholars of the subject to help analyze the idea of the cyber community and its links to real communities.

At this point I would like to clarify exactly what I mean when talking about community, and what the definition of a community is in the context of this essay. I will use a simple definition, often accustomed to the debate about virtual communities. Aaron Davidson states *'When Internet critics speak of community, they refer to the definition of community as a group of people who live together in close physical proximity, I will refer to this type of community as a Classic Community. The more general essence of community is a group of people, which share a common interest. This more flexible definition encompasses both physical communities as well as more intangible communities such as special interest clubs and online communities'* (<http://spaz.ca/aaron/school/online.html> Accessed 20/04/03).

This definition of community translates that a classical 'real life' community is a group of people who are geographically local to each other and so form bonds due to location and not necessarily interests, such as street parties, or communal bonfires and firework shows. The non-classical internet community is when people group together in a non-physical text based platform due to a common interest on a certain subject, such as a military vehicle web ring or music group discussions.

Taylor (1982) states the core attributes that are (or should be) possessed by all communities to some extent are, common beliefs and values, direct and many-sided relationships between members, and reciprocity and communication. While shared values and beliefs generally promote communication, the presence of communication does not necessarily result in shared values. This has a key implication for the creation of cyber communities as unlike real life communities' people accessing them do so for the

topic, such as health, music or films and through this shared affinity for the subject communication is initiated, while some might access purely for communication and not information, they are going to try and generate conversation within the topic range they are interested in (Rheingold 2000).

I will now try to categorize a framework of characteristics that would be associated with a cyber community, and how these differ from their 'real life' counterparts. I located several definitions from different writers on the characteristics, which an online community has, but they all seem to be able to be grouped together under five headings.

The first is that they are spatial, in that they are not restrained by geography, the community is able to be built and developed not only on a national scale but more on an international scale now, and not just within the close geographical proximities experienced by real world communities. They are developed around an understanding or appreciation of a topic, which brings people together, which may or may not have known each other prior to the discussion, while 'real life' communities are often forced together either through the location of residence or through working ties. Virtual communities such as the WELL for example grew within a region of America (San Francisco Bay) but to become a member you don't have to live in San Francisco to participate in the community and the building of bonds within it (Rheingold 2000).

The second is that virtual communities are asynchronous, in that communication doesn't have to take place in real time, unless the community is built within a chat room environment, but even in this environment they often facilitate the use of a message board for users to access. Messages and information can be posted and replies received days later (Castells 2001). For sustained communication to take place in the 'real world' at least two people are needed at the same time, even if not at the same location via telephone.

Third due to the lack of data able to be sent the communities are predominantly text based. For decades, online communities were built with nothing more than unformatted text. Web-based media bring inline graphics, animations, video, sounds, formatted text, and links into the conversation, creating a more dynamic ability to communicate with other users, and therefore enhancing the community being developed (Jones 1997). 'Real life' communities are able to be built not just on text (speech) but also

through the use of paralinguistic features, these non verbal gestures help to add meaning, and the impact of a face to face discussion is amplified due to facial features which are not evident in the computer world, but can be expressed as text (Jones 1997).

The Fourth characteristic is that they are astigmatic, in those physical attributes such as race, gender, and physical impairments, which would often locate an individual in certain social standings in 'real life', are not present on the cyber communities. Religion is also not an important issue in virtual communities. These aspects not only shape our social standing but can inhibit our involvement in social gatherings and communal events simply because we are not aesthetically matched, but in the virtual world these impairments, and characteristics do not affect our acceptance and do not need to be made public unless the individual chooses to do so. People whose physical handicaps make it difficult to form new friendships find that virtual communities treat them as they always wanted to be treated as thinkers and transmitters of ideas and feeling beings, not carnal vessels with a certain appearance and way of walking and talking (or not walking and not talking)

([http://www.eff.org/Net\\_culture/Virtual\\_community/slice\\_of\\_life.article](http://www.eff.org/Net_culture/Virtual_community/slice_of_life.article) Accessed 22/04/03).

The fifth key feature of a virtual community is that the members of a virtual community are anonymous from each other, unless they choose to meet in person. Unlike in real life where face to face interaction leads to people being able to recognize outside of the community environment, while community members on the virtual plain would not recognize each other if passing in the street. This ability to remain anonymous from other users offers virtual citizens the ability to create their own virtual identity and mold their appearance as they see fit, playing out fantasies online (Castells 2001). This can be seen with a quote from the blockbuster movie 'The Matrix' where Neo and Morpheus are discussing the Matrix and how it offers Neo and the users the chance to portray their "residual self image, the mental projection of your digital self" as Morpheus quotes to Neo. This is the same in a virtual community where members are able to portray themselves as they wish others to see them; whether truthful or false the anonymity provided by the virtual community allows freedom from physical flaws present in their 'real life' personas (Jones 1997).

That was the five key characteristics identified by many people as to what makes a virtual community different from a 'real life' example.

Another characteristic that is evident with online communication is the fact that it can be conducted on a 'many to many' basis. This is different from the format of 'few to many' associated with a broadcast, or 'one to one' such as telephone conversation. Virtual communities offer groups of people the ability to communicate with many others simultaneously.

A brief overview of the characteristics of a virtual community shows as that they are not bound by geography, but are bonded together by interests and bonds formed through these interests.

Communication doesn't have to be undertaken in real time, and is predominantly text based. No physical or religious pre conceived prejudices are experienced as members are able to remain anonymous from each other in the 'real world' and so any physical attributes or religious beliefs are made public to fellow members through the free choice of the individual. Finally communication can be carried out on a many to many interaction with lots of people contributing to the discussion if and when they feel they should.

The difference between 'real life' and cyber (virtual) communities are evident then, but is this the end of the discussion as to whether they should or shouldn't be classed as 'real'?

Possibly the most significant aspect of these more mainstream uses of the Internet is not their status as alternative communities, but the opportunities they offer for individuals to supplement their lives in real world communities ([http://www.harvardlawreview.org/issues/112/7\\_1586.htm#fn35](http://www.harvardlawreview.org/issues/112/7_1586.htm#fn35) Accessed 20/04/03). Cyber communities are often seen and categorized in this way as an extension of our communal lives and that they extend our real life communities to new levels. Ray Oldenburg (1991) states that there are three essential places in every person's life, the place they live, the place they work, and the place they gather for conviviality. Virtual communities can fulfill the role of the third place re-matting the fabric of community spirit, which has been lost in the modern 'real' world where community bonds are being eroded. The ability to network, gain knowledge, or find communion within cyberspace is, according to Rheingold (2000), the social glue that binds formerly isolated individuals into a community (<http://www.well.com/user/hlr/texts/VCcivil.html> Accessed 22/04/03).

I tend to agree with this finding that cyber communities do not stand-alone but are interwoven with our real life communal experiences, and so I feel to a certain extent they should be discussed as real communities, but with an air of caution when doing so.

The key difference between the cyber and real community is the context of the plain they are built on, whether it being physical or virtual. They both exist together with real world topics being the basis for many of the interactions experienced within there cyber counterparts, further leads me to the view that they presently only fulfill the role of enhancing or communal lives in real life.

The key similarity between the two community environments is the constant communication, forming links and bonds, however the initiation process in cyber communities is also different. In traditional kinds of communities, we are accustomed to meeting people, then getting to know them; in virtual communities, you can get to know people and then choose to meet them. In some cases, you can get to know people who you might never meet on the physical plain (Rheingold 2000). The point that cyber communities can exist as asynchronous is contested by Jones (1997), saying that synchronicity when users interact at the same time such as in a chat room, the occupants are less interested in the topic but more so in the individual doing the talking, less interested in text than in community. This offers the argument that not all communication on the internet is communal, and only the real time chat room environments when people discuss and form real time bonds with one another in quick fire conversations does the feeling of community really exist. From my experiences on the Internet and especially in chat rooms I would have to agree with this. When I post a message on a guest book or message board, I don't get a feeling interaction with others, but within the environment of a chat room I am able to build bonds, and return to them at later dates with a sense, if only small at first of knowing the other users of the room. Jones (1997) also accounts for this and the issue of free riding, where he quotes Ostrom (1990) identified free riding as the key threat to community formation and well-being, free riders being surfers of the Internet who do not participate in the community but simply use it for its resources.

I have outlined here some of the theories and thoughts offered on the subject of cyber communities and I want to know draw them all together and conclude this writing.

For cyber communities to be discussed in the same context as real world examples there is the point that they offer the user a sense of belonging, albeit a different one from the real world. They also incorporate a large amount of people, all communicating and sharing experiences with each other, which is the same as in the traditional physical communities.

Cyber communities are built around a shared value or interests, you are able to choose to join the community or not, you are not forced into it through work or residence. This point offers the question of how strong the bonds are between the people, simply because they have a shared interest in a certain topic, the commitment to one another in the cyber realm compared to the real world is a lot weaker, as Jones (1997) states, in the book, *Virtual culture*.

People who communicate via words on a screen don't necessarily share the same level of commitment to each other in real life as more traditional communities. Communities can emerge from and exist within computer-linked groups, but that technical linkage of electronic personae is not sufficient to create a community (Jones 1997).

Howard Rheingold states brilliantly one of the key advantages of partaking in a virtual community, "life will be happier for the on-line individual because the people with whom one interacts most strongly will be selected more by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity"(Rheingold 2000).

For the feeling of community to exist the key attribute identified through my study is the need for sustained communication between the members. I will use the following quote from The Electronic Frontier Foundation website to sum up the conclusion of this study.

'When a group of people remains in communication with one another for extended periods of time, the question of whether it is a community arises. Virtual communities might be real communities, they might be pseudocommunities, or they might be something entirely new in the realm of social contracts, but they are in part a response to the hunger for community that has followed the disintegration of traditional communities around the world'

([http://www.eff.org/Net\\_culture/Virtual\\_community/slice\\_of\\_life.article](http://www.eff.org/Net_culture/Virtual_community/slice_of_life.article) Accessed 20/04/03).

Therefore cyber communities are real communities, they are very similar, where links and bonds are formed in a non-physical environment, and that these cyber communities should be discussed in the same context as real life examples but not separately but as an extension of our physical communal lives.

## **Bibliography**

- THE ELECTRONIC FRONTIER FEDERATION. (2002). *A SLICE OF LIFE IN MY VIRTUAL COMMUNITY* [online]. California, Howard Rheingold. Available from: - <http://www.eff.org/> [accessed 20/04/03]
- UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON. (2003). *A NOT ON VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES* [online]. Washington, University of Washington. Available from: - <http://www.washington.edu/> [accessed 20/04/03]
- THE HARVARD LAW REVIEW. (2003). *DEVELOPMENTS IN THE LAW: THE LAW OF CYBERSPACE* [online]. Cambridge, Harvard Law Review. Available from: - <http://www.harvardlawreview.org> [accessed 20/04/03]
- UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY. (2003). *VOICES FROM THE WELL: THE LOGIC OF THE VIRTUAL COMMONS* [online]. Sydney, Marc A Smith. Available from: - <http://www.usyd.edu.au> [accessed 20/04/03]
- UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA. (2003). *ONLINE COMMUNITIES VERSUS CLASSICAL COMMUNITIES* [online]. Canada, Aaron Davidson. Available from: - <http://spaz.ca/aaron/school/index.html> [accessed 20/04/03]
- SALON. (2003). *VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES, ABORT, RETRY, FAIL?* [Online]. Mexico, Jan Fernback. Available from: - <http://www.well.com> [accessed 20/04/03]
- Taylor, M. *Community, Anarchy and Liberty*. New York, Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Rheingold, H. *The virtual community: Homesteading on the electronic frontier*. London, MIT Press, 2000
- Castells, M. *The Internet galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, business and society*. Oxford, Oxford, 2001
- Jones, S. *Virtual Culture: Identity and communication in cyber society*. London, Sage, 1997.
- Gauntlett, D. *Web Studies: Rewiring media studies for the digital age*. London, Arnold, 2000.