THE POSSIBILITIES OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

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People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. You can't kiss anybody and nobody can punch you in the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries. To the millions who have been drawn into it, the richness and vitality of computer-linked cultures is attractive, even addictive. (Rheingold, 1993, para. 15)

The American front porch served as a primary context for social engagement before the introduction of the suburbs in the 1950s. Typically these porches were large enough for a glider and some chairs. They were spacious, inviting, and close to the social current of the sidewalk (“In the past decade,” 1955). At another place in time, the European market square gathered the community members to sell, buy, haggle, and carry on significant socially reinforcing exchanges. Historically, the experience of interpersonal connection (referred in this paper as “community”) found expression in a place or “immediate presence”… “body to body” (Goffman, 1983, p. 14). Urbanization, suburbanization, individualism, and speed of the culture are some of the forces that functioned to reduce those places in the contemporary context limiting the ways people communicate. In recent times, though social interaction as a function of physical place is challenged, the frontier for computer mediated communication (CMC) is broad and offers promising and swiftly changing modes of engagement. Concerns about the efficacy of online community confront this optimism raising a chorus of questions and doubts. Howard Rheingold, author of The Virtual Community, addresses these uncertainties stating, “Those who critique CMC because some people use it obsessively hit an important target, but miss a great deal more when they don't take into consideration people who use the medium for genuine human interaction” (Rheingold, 1993, para. 25)
In what follows, I assemble some of the elements of community into a working definition. I probe into the problems and possibilities of the virtual social environment integrating comparisons with face-to-face traditional community. I look at the process of relational development in cyberspace. In summary, I am asking: Can viable relationships, whether person-to-person or “many-to-many,” (Rheingold, 1993, para 76) be forged in a virtual environment?

**Seeking a Definition of Community**

Humans are relational creatures who function optimally when in community. Communion with others and a sense of belonging are essential to well-being (Dahlberg, 2007). The ongoing quest for community is satisfied in locatable social places which are characterized by distinctively different nuances. A book discussion group, an intimate friendship, an AA meeting, and a softball team are mutual gatherings each with expected levels of engagement. When we discuss the idea of community, some kind of coherent definition is helpful. In 1936, urban sociologist Robert Park’s classic definition included the established of group of people in a physical place who are mutually interdependent. In the 20 years after Park defined the parameters of community, over 94 subsequent definitions emerged. Contained in these were three common elements that that sociologist G.A. Hillery summarized as essential to a working description of community. Those elements are: 1) A specific place, 2) common ties, and 3) social interaction (Driskell & Lyon, 2002).

The German sociologist, Ferdinand Tonnies proposed two kinds of social groups. His two models further inform the notion of community. Gemeinschaft encompasses an “intimate, private, and exclusive living together” (Tonnies, 2002, p. 33). It incorporates all three elements of
space, common ties, and social interaction mentioned previously. The ideal Gemeinschaft interactions (Driskell & Lyon, 2002, p. 377) are characterized as:

- Close and intimate
- Holistic and all encompassing
- Emotional and supportive
- Long-term and enduring
- Based on common values
- Associated with regular interaction

By contrast, Gesellschaft resembles Gemeinschaft to the extent that the members of the group live together, but each member in Gesellschaft is essentially isolated and intrusions into the separate lives are considered antagonistic acts. Historically, as a society transitions from small rural environments consisting of these well-knit familial ties to densely populated industrial ones, separation occurs in individual desires and belief systems. Place, in this case, remains static (element one), but common ties (element two) and social interaction (element three) are fractured. Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft are polarized ideals and a practical definition would fall someplace between the two concepts (Tonnies, 2002).

Philosopher Martin Buber believed genuine community is “rare and one has a right to wonder if it exists at all” (Kramer & Gawlick, 2003, p. 88). Buber maintains a vision for community dialogue and cites two models: The Hasidic community and the learning community. The Hasidic community is comprised of individuals “who have a common, immediate relation to a living center, and just by virtue of this common center have an immediate relation to one another” (Kramer & Gawlick, 2003, p. 88). The learning community exists to listen to and discuss
many viewpoints. A variety of perspectives is the substance of energetic ongoing dialogue. In the learning community, “open-minded honesty and willingness to be changed are valued more than like-mindedness” (Kramer & Gawlick, 2003 p. 91).

The three basic components recommended by Hillery are satisfied in Gemeinschaft and in Buber’s models. Tonnies’ six characteristics enhance our understanding of a high functioning community. I am using these three fundamental components ((1) A specific place, 2) common ties, and 3) social interaction) as the practical description of the term “community,” though there is a wide range of possibilities within that framework. This definition also seeks to further qualify the idea of “viable relationships” mentioned in paragraph three of this paper.

**The Possibilities of Virtual Community**

The traditional idea of community is indistinguishably located in a physical space and a body-to-body mutual presence. This place, as one of three essential elements of our definition of community, is distinctly absent in virtual engagement. The “place” of cyberspace is disembodied. Cyber relationships are sustained independent of a face-to-face meeting. Though the place of traditional community is absent in virtual community (VC), its defining parameters are largely aligned with face-to-face definitions. Quentin Jones fashions an acknowledged explanation of virtual communities as the “virtual place where people interact” (Blanchard, 2011, p.2). It includes: 1) a minimal number of 2) public interactions 3) with a variety of communicators in which there is a minimal level of sustained membership over a period of time. A “virtual place” replaces the immediate presence of place. An essential substitute for place then is a psychological sense of community (SOC) considered by some to be the distinguishing characteristic of a community in the cyber world. SOC is characterized by a “feeling of
membership…a feeling of influence…a feeling of being supported…and a shared emotional connection and history” (Blanchard, 2011, p. 2). A member of a small online group states, “I know this probably won't make sense, but I can walk into (log onto) my site and have a sense of surroundings that almost translates to a visual…warm and personal” (Jones, 2011).

Platforms for CMChave different characteristics which provide users with a choice in the manner of relating. Email, instant messaging, My Space, Facebook, blogs, social news groups, Twitter, Skype and established communities such as The Well, LiveJournal, ProBoards and multiple forums are online environments with variations in synchronicity, purpose, and visibility. The Well (Whole Earth Lectronic Link) calls itself “the birthplace of online community” (Well, 2011, para. 1). A San Francisco based group begun in 1985, the Well boasts over 4000 members with many having connected there for decades. An ongoing meta discussion of virtual communities by knowledgeable individuals is available to members. Observing the conversations helps to envision the variety of community and the pros and cons.

“I guess our site is kind of anti-facebook. We don't want to depend on Facebook users for a potential member pool. While we have a couple of fluffy threads, we really are not that kindof site. We do have actual discussions” (Jones, 2011).

“But I agree with you about Facebook, Twitter, et al - drive by conversations vs sustained conversations as we have here on the WELL. But I've seen some conversations there pick up steam and persist. I hear that some of the Facebook groups have effectively sustained interest and conversation.” (Lebkowsky, 2011)

I live in a rural area and opportunities for good social connection are limited and online alternatives are an attractive option. For several years this connection has been
mostly via Facebook and emailing. One late evening a couple of months ago I was alone and feeling a bit isolated. I was doing library research and saw a notice for a live chat with a librarian. I did not yield to the temptation to call her or him, but for a brief moment I discovered an empathy with those who are more isolated than myself or simply enjoy online opportunities for relating. I have since experimented with other platforms including Twitter, Huffington Post Social News, Quora, Skype, Instant Messaging, and The Well.

I jumped into a conversation on the Well without reading the user agreement. After making my first blunders and evoking some scathing rebukes, I was ready to abandon my VC project when I received a personal email from a long-standing Well member:

“Hi Marty,

You really should give the folks on the Well a chance to charm you. I suggest you click on their screen names and google their full names. You will find that you are talking to some amazing folks. Many of them are pioneers in their fields. Ever heard of Godwin's Law? That's (mnemonic), or Mike Godwin as he's known in the rest of the world. There are all kinds of writers - Bruce Sterling, Jane Hirshfield, Pam McCorduck, Jon Carroll. There are amazing musicians - RikEllswit, David Crosby. Professional intelligence analysts, including the head of British intelligence.

If you do as was suggested and go check out the conferences and topics on Virtual Communities you will undoubtedly learn a lot. You will have to read a little to get up to speed. The conversation has been going on for 25 years and you just walked...
into the room. If you want an example of how real this community is, there are several of us who are reaching out to rescue a member who we've never met who is on the verge of becoming homeless. It is a very real community.

Ciao' 4 now,

Bill"

I have since returned to the Well and, taking Bill’s advice, I am now finding great discussions and meeting some delightful people who are willing to embrace a “newbie.’ The Well community embodies the possibility of sustained and deep virtual relationships, albeit, with risks and some degree of commitment.

There are innumerable other virtual places in the digital terrain that may or may not fit within the description of a community. Community, in the way it is defined in this paper, may not be the goal of all virtual groups. Cyber games, virtual worlds, confessionals, and controversial social locations such as Chatroulette, Blindcamdate, and Omegie are worthy of mention because of their popularity. Many of these exhibit anti-community behaviors. Overt sexual overtures, intentional personality alterations, aggression, avatars, and easy dismissal remove many of these from this discussion as they may contribute more to a muddying of the waters of genuine connection (Turkle, 2011).

**The Development of Relationships**

With social cues mostly filtered in CMC, there is argument that the intricate negotiation of social interactions is even a realistic possibility believing it is impersonal
and best serves to perform work tasks. Joe Walther contradicts these assertions with his social information processing theory stating: “A core principle of social information processing theory (SIP) is that CMC users employ their verbal only medium to convey a level of relational communication that eventually equals the effect that can be expressed face-to-face through multiple channels” (Griffin, E. 2009, p. 142).

The process of deepening of relationships is depicted visually by social penetration theorists using an onion with its multiple deepening layers. The outer layers offer a superficial presentation of biographical data. The inner core is the concept of self. The layers are penetrated as the level of personal disclosure increases (Griffin, 2009, p. 115). “When one individual takes a risk by disclosing to another individual, the receiver feels as though he or she is trusted. In return, the receiver is more likely to disclose information as well” (Bruss & Hill, 2010, p. 3). Trust on or offline is developed and strengthened as individuals respond in positive ways in recurring interactions.

Reports of high self-disclosure online are explained by the safety of relative anonymity and the greater degree of reciprocity in exchanging self-disclosing sentiments. In addition, the absence of social cues in most types of online communication is offset by self-disclosure (Bruss & Hill, 2010). Though the claims to commitment to these online relationships are uncertain, hopes for genuine connection are undaunted. “People know this, and yet the emotional charge on cyberspace is high” (Turkle, 2011, p. 153). Face-to-face commitments also have a questionable historic track record. Risk is inherent in the pursuit of relationships in either world.

Caveat of Identity
“One doesn't have to make a conscious effort to construct on online persona that may be different from one's offline persona. People's unconscious efforts get the job done just fine” (Godwin, 2011).

Self-disclosure is fueled by sincerity. One of the mistakes I made in my careless entry into the Well was ambiguity about my real identity. Mike Godwin kindly made the above remark in my defense. My initial intent--research for this paper--was indicated on my blog. When “mnemonic” (Mr. Godwin) found the blog and posted a link, immediate suspicion and a flood of cutting remarks erupted in the thread. One playful comment came from Marla Hammond: “What is the proper Well protocol here? Do we play along with Marty Lane? Allow him/her/it to join in the conversation? Embrace the academic curiosity of it all? - - - OR - - - - Smash him flat. BUSTED. The message is - We know who you are and we saw what you did. Come clean, be yourself or be contextually shunned” (Hammond, 2011).

Another response helped me understand the outrage: “Think of how an eighth grader looks when they are trying to act hip/cool/fly. That's how a newbie with an agenda appears to this assemblage of wise guys” (Stockton, 2011).

Two kinds of identity are present in either face-to-face or CMC. A found identity is made of circumstances—sex, age, place of birth, education, marital status, religion, profession and all the other factual ways of describing a person. Made identity presents the way I want others to see me (Brown, 2011). Jean Paul Sarte asserts, “I am my body to the extent that I am” (Donath, 2011, p. 1), but the cyber world is made of information not tangible substance. Sociologist and writer Erving Goffman explains the impact of physical impressions when he states, “I remind you that it is in social situations that these
enablements and risks are faced and will have their initial effect. And it is social situations that provide the natural theater in which all bodily displays are enacted and in which all bodily displays are read” (Goffman, 1983, p. 4). In a disembodied virtual environment, a desirable made identity is easier to maintain or manipulate. Unseen, I am any age, any sex, prosperous, single, and even wise. Goffman asserts, “Correspondingly, (in face-to-face interactions) we are constantly in a position to facilitate revealment, or block it, or even misdirect our viewers” (Goffman, 1983, p.4). The possibility of identity deception or simple tweaking exists in both on and off line environments. “Deeply incorporated into the nature of talk are the fundamental requirements of theatricality” (Goffman, 1981 p. 54). The inherent possibility of deception has a weighty effect on trust and warrants vigilance and discernment, but this is also a crucial issue facing relationships in a face-to-face domain. Impression management is nothing new to social encounters. Neither is it always completely avoidable or ill-intended.

**Conclusion**

In an increasingly inhospitable world which has abandoned the sociable front porch for the security of a fenced backyard, CMC offers a hopeful frontier for new forms of hospitality to emerge. The three-pronged definition of community of: 1) A specific place (the “place” of cyberspace), 2) common ties, and 3) social interaction find ample fulfillment in the virtual social landscape. The internet opens a world of possibility for significant virtual community whether between individuals or within groups. These places of vibrant social connection are of no small significance and hold hope of access to life-enhancing relationship. Groups which are currently experiencing a high level of virtual social engagement are a resource for further investigation. Understanding how
these groups arrive at and sustain community would strengthen the study of CMC. A broad dissemination of the practical means of implementing quality virtual connections could serve to address the problem of human isolation and broaden the ways people are able to communicate.

References


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