ARTICLE

Virtual community: no 'killer implication'

ANDREW FEENBERG
Simon Fraser University, Canada

MARIA BAKARDJIEVA
University of Calgary, Canada

NEW MEDIA, NEW COMMUNITIES

Thirty-five years after Licklider and Taylor (1968) first envisioned virtual communities, and exactly 10 years after Rheingold (1993) popularized the concept, online sociability is a fact of everyday life. According to a Pew Internet & American Life Project report (2001), 84 percent of all American internet users contacted an online group at least once and 79 percent of these users remained in regular contact with at least one group. Pew noted that more people participated in these groups than bought things online.

Are all online groups virtual communities? The answer depends of course on the definition of community. If face-to-face contact is required by definition, then obviously no community can form online. We prefer to approach the question from the standpoint of Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined community: 'All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined' (1983: XXX) Thus, some sort of virtuality is a normal aspect of community life, regardless of the nature of the medium on which it relies. Anderson argues that communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. Communication media play a central role in determining the different styles in which communities have been imagined throughout history. The great sacred communities of the past (Christendom, the Islamic Ummah, the Middle Kingdom) were imagined through the medium of a sacred language and script. The birth of the imagined community of the nation involved two 'new media', the novel and the newspaper, that flowered in Europe in the 18th century (see Anderson, 1983). Broadcast media added a new dynamic to the imagined community

of the nation by fixating its joint attention and making it dance to the beat of the new 'tribal drum' (McLuhan, 1964). Later developments towards demassification and customization of content and delivery formats supported the emergence of a variety of subcultures, or 'neo-tribes' (Maffesoli, 1996). Most recently, the internet has exploded with imagined communities that are based on the swift interactive exchange of electronic text.

At first, these communities grew out of existing professional networks and solidarities, but they eventually surpassed these origins to offer a new social space for people, strangers and almost-strangers, with diverse backgrounds and interests to come together as equals, as generators of ideas, to deliberate and act collectively, and in some cases to remain together in long-term association. It is particularly significant that those who regularly participate at present are not exclusively the computer professional, educated and well-off élites of earlier times, but include numerous, more recent internet users who tend to be female, young, less-educated, lower in income, and non-White. Looking at their 2001 online group participation figures, the Pew researchers concluded that 'not only are cyber groups a magnet for Internet users, they are especially attractive to novice Internet users' (Pew, 2001: 16).

Even when they do not live up to the glorified and normatively laden concept of 'virtual community', online groups represent one of the great democratic achievements of recent technological development. They illustrate compellingly the possibility of 'democratic rationalization' (Feenberg, 1999) of technology by users themselves. Furthermore, online groups represent an alternative path of development for computer networking that is different from the nearly-complete commercialization that has befallen earlier communication technologies, such as radio and television.

There is precedent for this development. Communication technologies stand at a peculiar interface between the technical culture of those who create them, the commercial interests of those who produce and market them, and the everyday lifeworld of ordinary users. Studies of the early history of the telephone, radio and television testify to the desire of these users for additional channels of reciprocal communication, new ways of interacting and new forms of community. In the case of the telephone, initial resistance gave way to support for unanticipated usage. However, radio and television broadcasting crowded out other applications and centralized control over the form and content of these media. The internet is now a battlefield on which similar impulses contend. Online community arose from the margins of the medium, intruding on its original information-centred design from various sources such as bulletin boards, newsgroups and early computer conferencing systems. With the addition of this unanticipated communication layer, the technology addresses a wider range of human needs and potentials.

RESEARCH TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

As the phenomenon of virtual community spread, scholarly attention to it intensified. The new media literature overflows with theoretical analyses and empirical studies of online groups. At first there were intrigued travellers' tales about the exotic virtual lands of CompuServe forums (Van Gelder, 1996), MUDs (Dibell, 1993) and IRC (Reid, 1991). A multitude of ethnographic accounts followed in their footsteps, providing rich detail on the cultures and interaction rituals of particular online forums (Baym, 2000; Cherny, 1999; Slater, 2003). A parallel stream of studies set out to examine the ways in which existing local communities employed the new medium to discuss pressing issues and to build stronger bonds among citizens and neighbors (Mele, 1999; Schuler, 1996; Uncapher, 1999). A third area of active research served business organizations that wanted to use online community to stimulate team work and productivity (Mynatt et al., 1998). Cutting across all these empirical research orientations were philosophical debates that disputed the good and the ill, the promise and the danger inherent in this new form of social life (Barney and Feenberg, forthcoming).

Much of the earlier work on virtual communities focused on the supposed 'killer implication' of the new medium, the one great impact that would define its significance for the future. McLuhan's postulate, 'the medium is the message', haunted these efforts. If, as it is believed, print had made its culture individualistic and linearly thinking (Ong, 1982) and television had brought about a fragmented sensibility and the impulse to 'amuse ourselves to death' (Postman, 1985), what would be the profound transformative 'message' of online community?

Like most design work that aims to find an elusive 'killer application' for the constantly emerging variations of new communication technology, this overly ambitious research strategy has not borne fruit. At this point in time, we can say with confidence that virtual community has no killer implication. Online forums stage superficial fun, deeply spiritual experiences, and practically useful exchanges without discrimination. In defiance of both optimists and prophets of gloom, they are rarely either uplifting or degrading and much more often simply amusing, instrumental or inconsequential. They give rise to specialized relationships, not all-embracing solidarities. They are driven by fleeting interests, not unconditional commitments. In short, they have colonized a technical system that is intended for information exchange by implanting within it a staggering variety of old, hybrid, and brand new forms of human sociality. Thus, what the internet offers is a flexible communicative space that can be construed and bent in an infinite number of ways by sufficiently motivated groups of people. The implications and significance of what these groups build depends on the shape that they give to the space they create, and the

relationships produced within it. But they have not fulfilled the world-transforming promise or realized the dystopian fears of early speculation.

NEW SOBRIETY, NEW DEFINITIONS

The various actors using and studying the new medium seem to be settling on the view that online groups are neither all good nor all bad, but somewhere inbetween. Despite their proliferation, civic life and political involvement in most Western societies have not experienced quite as significant a boost as some optimistic forecasters expected. For example, the US is networked, as early proponents Hiltz and Turoff (1978) anticipated, but despite some impressive demonstrations of its potential, so far the internet has not had the large-scale democratizing consequences that they envisioned. On the other hand, the atomizing and isolating effects that were feared by pessimistic observers appear greatly exaggerated. Most of us know people who regularly frequent a professional or hobbyist virtual group, deriving ample benefit and pleasure from participation without shutting themselves off from face-to-face meetings, parties and occasional drinks in good company.

Two durable results of great significance emerge from the huge body of research that has been produced in recent years. First, studies of the origin and functions of online groups demonstrate the remarkable power of the medium to enable new forms of sociability. Second, studies that enquire into the motives for joining and contributing these groups demonstrate consistently that online participation offers unique opportunities for actively and interactively pursuing identity-related projects that used to be impossible, and even inconceivable. Notably, these projects express situated personal experiences, needs and problems, and thus undermine the clichéd distinction between 'virtual' and 'real' life (Bakardjieva, 2003; Ward, 1999).

We now stand at a peculiar milestone in the development of both online communities and their accompanying discourses. Writing in the first issue of *new media & society* nearly five years ago, Sonia Livingstone noted that 'a considerable difficulty with the new media is that they are not yet here' (1999: 60). Discourses about them rest 'less on experience than on extrapolation from the past combined with speculation about the future' (1990: 61). We would add that these discourses were, and to some extent still are, driven by the competing definitions and vested interests that different social actors associate with the new media. What has changed over the past few years is that these media have finally arrived. To paraphrase Livingstone: users have used them, researchers have researched them and policymakers have had the chance to gauge their significance. However, does that mean that these media are no longer new? What are the implications of taking away their novelty status?

THE POLITICS OF THE NEW

Today, we suffer from what might be called 'novelty fatigue'. This is the point at which the excitement and even the curiosity about the new are beginning to wear off. In the lingo of social constructivism (see Pinch and Bijker, 1987), closure of debate about the emerging technical (and cultural) artifact is in sight. Distinctive practices have consolidated around the new medium. The danger of the current stage in the evolution of online community is that of premature closure. Analysts and users alike can take the medium for granted too easily and assume that its present form is final, rather than a passage to things to come. We believe that this would be a dangerous step. Once media are treated as finished products, their further development will be left to experts, excluding radical questioning and ignoring lay experimentation. Insisting on their newness, on the other hand, means retaining openness for negotiation, debate and inclusive decision-making.

Thus, it is a good time to remind ourselves that online groups are indeed a qualitatively new medium. We are far from final understanding of them. Rather, we are at the point where systematic research on them can begin to bear fruit. It is extremely important, then, to continue to approach these media as first drafts, not finished products, and hence open to revision and redesign on the basis of the results of research. Research can identify, describe and understand the specific forms of social life within computer-supported environments and the related benefits, drawbacks and consequences for participants, culture and society. Such research findings can become the basis for the further development – technical, institutional and cultural – of these communication forms toward socially-desired ends.

However, currently the shaping of online communities in most countries remains outside the public policy arena and in the hands of commercial and small-scale civic players, and is guided mainly by enthusiasm, intuition and the pursuit of profit. Existing research on online group life, despite its volume, has contributed only marginally to the social shaping of the medium. Most importantly, research has been performed typically *on* online community members and not *for* them; that is, without the explicit intent to inform their ongoing efforts at creating and sustaining effective online environments (see Bakardjieva et al., forthcoming). Therefore, it is time for researchers to realize that they must position themselves as participants in the process of development by placing their results at the disposal of the online communities that they study. Thus begins a new phase in the study of these new media.

References

Anderson, B. (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Bakardjieva, M. (2003) 'Virtual Togetherness: an Everyday Life Perspective', *Media, Culture and Society* 25(3): 291–313.

Bakardjieva M., A. Feenberg and J. Goldie (forthcoming) 'User-centered Internet Research: the Ethical Challenge', in E. Buchanan (ed.) *Readings in Virtual Research Ethics: Issues and Controversies*. Location???: Idea Group Inc.

Barney, D. and A. Feenberg (forthcoming) *Community in the Digital Age: Philosophy and Practice*. Location???: Rowman and Littlefield.

Baym, N. (2000) *Tune in, Log on: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cherny, L. (1999) *Conversation and Community: Chat in a Virtual World*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.

Dibbell, J. (1993) 'A Rape in Cyberspace: How an Evil Clown, a Haitian Trickster Spirit, Two Wizards, and a Cast of Dozens Turned a Database Into a Society', URL (consulted 26 May 2003): http://www.juliandibbell.com/texts/bungle_vv.html

Feenberg, A. (1999) *Questioning Technology*. New York and London: Routledge.

Hiltz, R. and M. Turoff (1978) *The Network Nation: Human Communication via Computer*. London: Addison Wesley.

Licklider, J.C.R. and R.W. Taylor (1968) 'The Computer as a Communication Device', *International Science and Technology* (April): ???–???.

Livingstone, S. (1999) 'New Media, New Audiences?', *New Media & Society* 1(1): 59–66.

McLuhan, M. (1964) *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Maffesoli, M. (1996) *The Time of the Tribes: the Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. London: Sage.

Mele, C. (1999) 'Cyberspace and Disadvantaged Communities: the Internet as a Tool for Collective Action', in M. Smith and P. Kollock (eds) *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 290–310. London and New York: Routledge.

Mynatt, E., V. O'Day, A. Adler and M. Ito (1998) 'Network Communities: Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed', *Computer-supported Cooperative Work* 7 1(2): 123–56.

Ong, W. (1982) *Orality and Literacy: Technologizing the Word*. New York: Methuen.

Pew Internet & American Life Project (2001) 'Online Communities: Networks that Nurture Long-Distance Relationships and Local Ties', 31 October, URL (consulted 15 May 2003): http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/reports.asp?Report = 47and Section = ReportLevel2andField = Level2IDandID = 272

Pinch, T. and W. Bijker (1987) 'The Social Construction of Facts and Artifacts', in W. Biker, T. Huges and T. Pinch (eds) *The Social Construction of Technological Systems*, pp. 17–50. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Postman, N. (1985) *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness*. New York: Viking.

Reid, E. (1991) 'Electropolis: Communication and Community on Internet Relay Chat', unpublished MA thesis, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

Rheingold, H. (1993) *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Schuler, D. (1996) *New Community Networks: Wired for Change*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Smith, M. and P. Kollock (1999) *Communities in Cyberspace*. London and New York: Routledge.

Uncapher, W. (1999) 'Electronic Homesteading on the Rural Frontier: Big Sky Telegraph and its Community', in M. Smith and P. Kollock (eds) *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 264–89. London and New York: Routledge.

Van Gelder, L. (1996[1985]) 'The Strange Case of the Electronic Lover', in R. Kling (ed.) *Computers and Controversy: Value Conflicts and Social Choices* (2nd edn), pp. 533–46. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Ward, K. (1999) 'Cyber-ethnography and the Emergence of the Virtually New Community', *Journal of Information Technology* 14: 95–105.

ANDREW FEENBERG is Canadian Research Chair in Philosophy of Technology in the School of Communication, Simon Fraser University. He has also taught in the philosophy department of San Diego State University. His many books include *Alternative Modernity* (University of California Press, date???), *Questioning Technology* (Routledge, date???), and *Transforming Technology* (Oxford, date???) He is currently studying the internet on a grant from the National Science Foundation.
Address: [email: ???]

MARIA BAKARDJIEVA is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Communication and Culture, University of Calgary, Canada. Her research interests focus on internet use in everyday life and its social and cultural implications.
Address: [email: ???]