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The Evolution of Online Communities

Technology in general is often cited as a factor that contributes to the decline of community. However, the Internet's link to this putative decline remains a major topic of dispute, as commentators consider whether the Internet's ability to enable interactive communication might enhance civic participation and association. The level of democracy and the level of interactive communication are correlated. The most plausible relationship between democracy and interactive communication is probably a virtuous circle with positive feedback.

The ability of online users to interact in sophisticated ways, forming cyber-communities, may be what most differentiates the Internet from past developments in communications technology. Internet technology enables people to meet, and talk, and live in cyberspace in ways not possible in real-space. It permits many-to-many communication unattainable with past technologies, which enabled only one-to-one or broadcast communication.

Traditionally, geography has helped to indicate community. Although geography arguably remains important in defining cyber-community, life in cyberspace is neither limited nor defined by geographic constraints. We are better served in the Internet context by an experiential conception of community, rather than a geographic one.

Cyber-communities might be categorized upon a variety of criteria. Thus, we have categories such as:

- -- Geographic cyber-communities
- -- Demographic cyber-communities
- -- Topical cyber-communities
- -- Vertical industry cyber-communities
- -- Functional cyber-communities

No matter what kind of criteria we are using to categorize cyber-communities, we should refrain from conceiving their nature as fixed

much as the Internet's nature is not fixed.

The following issues factor most importantly in the evolution of cyber-communities:

- (a) How public and private spaces in cyberspace are designated.
- (b) The degree of tailoring the online experience to individual preferences.
- (c) How the Internet meshes with other technologies.
- (d) The degree of segmentation of the cyber-community.
- (e) The degree of expansion of the cyber-community to arenas that bear no relation to the community's original focus.

The private vs. public model

In one view, the Internet should remain a model of diverse and open access, decentralization, and public intercourse. Another view holds that economic markets and emerging technology will properly enable sophisticated proprietary control, meaning that users will mainly gain access to cyberspace through private providers. An intermediate position suggests the possibility of zoning, i.e. designating some spaces on the Internet as publicly accessible, while allowing other spaces to remain privately controlled.

The tailored online experience

Technology and market forces are also transforming how tailored an individual's Internet experience will be. The Internet has, probably, been the major power that lies behind the transformation of the industrial economy of the 20th century into the experience economy of the 21st century. That transformation concerns various issues such as the issue of "filtering."

The Internet and other technologies

The Internet's links to other technologies will also be critical in shaping

future configurations of cyber-communities. Interactive television, Internet telephony either through mobile or not devices are already available, and as the Internet becomes more integrated into familiar technologies, it will begin to seem less separate from our daily lives. The more the Internet changes the tools of technology that people are using in their daily lives the more difficult it becomes to imagine life exclusively either in real space or cyberspace.

The degree of segmentation

The spirit of community tends to be greater in smaller groups where it is possible for people to have more in common. Therefore, the more ways a cyber-community can be split into smaller cyber-sub-communities the better. Cyber-sub-communities tend to keep their members more focused and dedicated than cyber-communities that consist of hundreds of thousands of members. Advertisers in cyberspace know that and are willing to pay high premiums in exchange of information that would help them target segregated users. Aside from advertisers, the degree of segmentation of cyber-communities could be extremely valuable for politics, politicians and politically active citizens as well.

The degree of expansion

The degree of expansion refers to the cyber-community's potential in building out to arenas that bear no relation to the cyber-community's original focus. The skilled leading minds of cyber-communities will be able to organize them much as to encourage them to ally with bigger and/or more reputable cyber-communities. Aside from being organizers of cyber-sub-communities, the leading minds in cyberspace are coalition organizers and network incubators of cyber-communities.

The following three factors could be used to leverage the potential of cyber-communities:

- 1) The common purpose or project involving sustained interaction among members.
- 2) The boundaries, with some group control over membership and exit.
- 3) The degree of group governance over group norms and behavior.

One key element of cyber-communities is a sense of common purpose among the community's members. The amount of freedom people have to shape speech in cyber-communities will be crucial to the types of communities in cyberspace that will emerge. Freedom of speech in the cyber-communities relates to issues such as sexually explicit speech, libellous speech, and "spam" (cyber "junkmail"). For a political entity that seeks to leverage political activism in cyberspace, the freedom of speech in the cyber-communities that are organized and led by that political entity is a thorny issue.

In addition to the community's purpose, another element critical to defining community in cyberspace involves membership boundaries, i.e. the ability of community members to include or exclude members, to distinguish members from non-members, and to keep private the actions of group members.

The issue of member termination by an Internet Service Provider (ISP) or a cyber-community organizer concerns whether cyber-communities are justified in excluding undesirables. If the private model continues to gain strength among ISPs and if access to the Internet simultaneously becomes more vital, courts and lawmakers will need to consider whether Internet access rights to private services in cyberspace exist and whether state action should be imputed onto these services.

The ability of ISPs, political entities, and other Internet groups to discriminate in choosing their members will also influence the shape and feel of cyber-communities. It will make the difference between anarchy and democracy in cyberspace.

A final issue of community membership control concerns the right of group members to remain anonymous both within and without a given

online community. The law's treatment of anonymity will largely determine what types of interactions thrive on the Internet and whether the Net's potential for permitting a heightened degree of anonymity is realized. Anonymity and pseudonymity in cyberspace is a difficult issue that political entities which leverage cyberspace will have to deal with. Probably the most efficient way to deal with it would be to examine it independently of anonymity and pseudonymity in real space.

Whether cyber-communities, like other recognized autonomous groups in society, will be accorded a degree of autonomous governance depends upon how separately society allows these communities to exist and the degree to which real-space life is considered to be affected by Internet relationships. Legal rules will certainly affect which communities thrive and which fail, as well as how these communities will impact and become part of our real-space lives. As courts and legislatures begin to address these issues, an open mind and a spirit of experimentation will be crucial, lest we freeze the development of the Internet and cyber-communities

references

Harvard Law Review, issue 112, *"Developments in the Law -- The Law of Cyberspace."*

John Hagel III and Arthur G. Armstrong, *"Net Gain -- Expanding Markets Through Virtual Communities"* Harvard Business School Press, 1999.