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The emergence of Online Communities

In 1993, Howard Rheingold defined "virtual communities" as social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.

Laurence Canter and Martha Siegel, two immigration lawyers from Phoenix were among the first to publish a business text that considers online communities. According to Canter and Siegel, "It is important to understand that the Cyberspace community is not a community at all."

"Online community" is a term that we use to refer to some aggregations of persons who gather on the Internet for educational, commercial, or political reasons.

The concept of community refers to groups of people held together by direct personal relationships, strong common values, feelings of solidarity, and reciprocal recognition. While communication is a crucial dynamic part of the fundamental process for the structure of a community, communication by itself does not necessarily create a community.

In a 1997 survey of Internet business models, *The Economist* argued that the Web malls that had sprung up in their thousands over the previous years had been an "abject failure," adding that "the industry has defined electronic commerce too narrowly... [Success is] in the few businesses that are increasingly grouping themselves by theme, joining or creating consumer communities with shared interests."

In their book "*Net Gain: Expanding Markets Through Virtual Communities*" John Hagel III and Arthur G. Armstrong discussed about the management of virtual communities. They coined the term "organic management style" in order to describe a radically different approach to virtual communities' management in which a high degree of autonomy is ceded to members, and managers display "a gardener's

touch." "Seeding, weeding, and feeding are the best metaphors for online organization and evolution."

In 1999, David Wilson delivered the paper "*Creating Compelling Commerce Sites via Community*" at the Internet Commerce Expo (Boston, March 1999) in which he stated that "Many electronic commerce sites have failed to create compelling reasons for customers to change their buying behavior. The missing element: community. By using interactive discussions, businesses can infuse electronic commerce sites with community, thereby delivering value in addition to convenience, enhancing perceived trustworthiness, and creating online experiences conducive to shopping instead of simple browsing or buying... Community is the fourth evolution of the Internet, and commerce sites that don't harness it will miss out."

Characteristics of Online Communities

An online community is a more sophisticated way of inscribing commercial imperatives into communication and interaction. It is a means of advancing existing techniques of market segmentation, mass customization, and narrowcasting.

A commercial online community is usually organized via systems of rewards, disincentives and punishment, and the normalization of particular modes of behavior. A degree of regulation and ordering is necessary in any online community. Yet, at the same time, a degree of freedom and autonomy must exist for an online community to succeed. Usually, the smaller the community, the stronger the links will be between the individual members. However, the smaller the community, the fewer opportunities will be to make money off them.

Most probably, an online community will be dominated by people used to operating in "gift economies." The Internet per se is associated with gift-giving and sharing. Individual members of an online community donate content for other members to use free of charge. In return, each individual receives access to all the content made available by group-members. The amount an individual receives is much more than he/she could produce alone. The "gift economy" works for the best interest of all the members of an online community. Gift-giving and

sharing of tangibles or intangibles is a way of promoting positive social interaction. Online communities -- either commercial or not -- that leverage the gift-giving and sharing nature of the Internet are more likely to prosper than those in which the exchange of information or any other goods has a cost.

In most cases, online communities are based upon individuals who are bound together for reasons that go beyond geography. Most likely, online communities are privatized networks of people who share at least one common tie. Members of an online community might interact each other directly or indirectly through an intermediary. They might never have a face-to-face meeting in real space despite having spent a significant amount of time associating with each other and building community relationships in electronic neighbourhoods.

Robin B. Harmman's study of AOL users ("Computer Networks Linking Network Communities: Effects of AOL Use Upon Pre-existing Communities") indicated that users -- such as the AOL focus group -- are not motivated by social isolation or loneliness to become members of online communities but rather by the ease with which they can have access to information online and keep in touch with their friends, colleagues and relatives from offline who have email accounts and Websites for themselves. Also, being online gives them the hope of making new offline contacts and friendships that could continue in their offline lives. Studies such as Malcolm R. Parks and Kory Floyd's "Making Friends in Cyberspace" indicated that online relationships and offline relationships are intercommunicating systems: people who meet in cyberspace and develop a relationship online tend to meet in real space as well as keep in contact via traditional means of communication such as telephone and snail mail.

In the Internet, membership of online communities is a candidate for threshold experiences mainly because of its distinctive social conditions. Compares to offline community life an online community member:

- Has high capability of anonymous or pseudonymous interaction, or at least the capability of interposing filters that mask some of the

characteristics of his/her personal identity.

- Has high capability of demarcating his/her online participation, thus keep it hidden from those who are physically close.
- Has high capability of changing the terms of his/her own participation by changing the features of his/her own online persona or by starting new participation with a completely new persona.

In the Internet, membership of online communities offers an unprecedented opportunity for cultivation and development of weak social ties. The conception of computer networks and online communities as pools of weak social ties and as means for connections of people offers a vision of society that opposes to what has been called "cyber-balkanization." This term indicates one of the limitations of offline communities, a limitation which makes the members of offline communities to interact with people similar to themselves and to avoid contact with people who are different. Luciano Paccagnella cites a case in which a computer network of people has functioned in stark opposition to "cyber-balkanization": The Shwashlock project developed by the Public Electronic Network of Santa Monica in the metropolitan area of Los Angeles. This was a project for the provision of essential services for homeless people. The Shwashlock project made possible the interconnection and dialogue between "mainstream" citizens and groups of people suffering discrimination such as the homeless.

While in the Internet weak social ties grow exponentially, we should not assume that online communities could guarantee equal distribution of resources in society. Moreover, we should remove "the UNESCO fallacy" from any conceptualization of online communities, i.e. the illusion that the possibility of bringing together representatives of all nations around a table would automatically resolve the world's problems.

Democracy and Online Communities

Responsive government is the best ally that online communities -- private or not -- could have in shaping an organization and

communication infrastructure that effectively meets their needs.

In relation to the netizens' right to form and participate in online communities, the role of a (local) responsive government should be to safeguard certain elements of democracy in cyberspace. These elements are:

- The right to form online communities either in the public Internet or in the private Intranets.

- The right to participate in online communities independently of financial power.

- The right to participate in online communities in a deliberative public process, i.e. online communities that:
 - Allocate adequate time for hearing and considering the multiple points of view of their members.

 - Organize discussions publicly (in a way that assures participation by all community-members, at least).

 - Have clear and widely known (by all community-members, at least) procedures through which concerns are brought up.

 - Safeguard equality of decision-making by granting vote of equal influence to all participant community-members.

There is nothing inherently democratic in the Internet much as there is nothing inherently democratic in radio or television. The analog means of mass communication could have been shaped into media that were more democratic if public policies had prevented the aggregation of mass media under the influence of a few media moguls. While the Internet is harder to harness than analog media, monopolistic formulas do not favor democracy in the Internet, and consequently, the netizens' right to form and participate in online communities.

We could, probably, make the hypothesis that the stronger the community problem-solving competence in online communities the less need there would be for government intervention. Increasing the

effectiveness of participation in online communities is important for democracy. A strengthened online community competence is necessary to compensate for diminished government involvement as well as to guide the future government involvement. In that sense, widespread individual access to the Internet and to online communities will become not a privilege but a necessary requirement for smooth functioning both of the administrative function of a state (administrative apparatus) and for a state's system of production (commercial apparatus).

Douglas Schuler gives examples of online community activism that assures democratic communication in cyberspace. Some of these examples, which focus on projects that have taken place in Seattle-USA, are:

- The "Civil Capital" project at the University of Washington (it can be found @ www.gspa.washington.edu/Trust/tighome.html) is an example of collaboration between academia and communities for a multi-year project aiming at exploring the issues leading to, and revolving around, public trust in government.

- "ONE/Northwest (Online Networking for the Environment)" (it can be found @ www.onenw.org) is a non-profit organization based in Seattle and provides technology assistance to conservation activists and organizations in Alaska, British Columbia, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington.

- The "Seattle Community Network (SCN)" (it can be found @ www.scn.org) is an example of free public computer network and Internet services to its subscribed users -- over 18,000. SCN has developed a strong set of principles that are intended to institutionalize the democratic objectives upon which it was founded.

- The Seattle Public Library (it can be found @ www.spl.org) provides for free public access terminals in all its branch libraries.

- In early 2000 the City of Seattle Department of Information Technology and the Citizens Telecommunications and Technology Advisory Board launched the "Information Technology Indicators for a

Healthy Community" project (the results of the project can be found @ www.cityofseattle.net/tech/indicators/indicators_report.doc). The project aimed at uncovering negative and positive effects that communication and information technology had on the city of Seattle.

- In 1996, the city of Seattle established a Citizen's Telecommunications and Technology Advisory Board (CTTAB) (it can be found @ www.pan.ci.seattle.wa.us/seattle/cttab) to help advise the city on a wide range of communications technology issues, including public access television, the city government channel, citizen access to city government and other electronic services, citizen technology literacy etc.

- The Sepakeasy Café (it can be found @ www.speakeasy.net) is an example of how technology can be integrated with community functions in the form of an Internet café.

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