

# The Virtual Community: A Review of Some Key Ideas

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## Abstract

The study of communities has been a predominant theme in the social scientific examination of the Internet. The term ‘virtual community’ has been understood in a number of different ways and has been one of the key areas of research in the social scientific examination of the Internet. This paper examines a number of key ideas of virtual community drawn predominantly from a political examination of the Internet.

The paper addresses four areas: (1) a populist yet important interpretation that regards virtual communities in a rather uncritical manner; (2) a more critical body of literature in which much is made of the restorative function of virtual communities; (3) a focus upon issues of identity and the public sphere; and (4) the idea of virtual community being closely linked to virtual identity and that the two should be considered in concert.

From the numerous instances of virtual community identified and the large amounts of theorisation of such phenomenon in the literature on virtual communities, it may be understood as illustrative of the dominance of the motifs of community and identity in late-modern societies. We argue that in addition to such phenomenon actually occurring, the study of community and identity in relation to the Internet may also be part of the dominance of such themes in societies in which the Internet has traditionally been studied.

**Keywords:** Virtual communities, online communities, virtual identity, Habermas, Internet, literature review

## Introduction

The study of communities has been a predominant theme in the social scientific examination of the Internet. This is arguably because, as with identity, community is a point of intense political

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debate in contemporary western society. As Miller, Coleman, Connolly and Ryan contend, community is a term that has a “high level of use but a low level of meaning” (1991, p.88). Williams notes that ‘community’ “never seems to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term” (1973, p.76). Community is indeed a rare form of noun, one that has no antonym and is a universally

popular idea. It is not surprising therefore that it has received so much attention with regards to online activity. Moreover, much of the study of online communities has a deeply political slant to it - community in general proves a contentious issue and it has long served as a rallying point for activists of differing political persuasions.

In this paper we seek to review a number of 'visions' or interpretations of virtual community that appear in academic literature that examine the Internet with a political slant. It should be noted that by 'political' we are not referring to 'big' or institutional politics, where the emphasis is directed towards actual activity occurring on the Internet and of the use of the Internet for manifestly political reasons. Nor are we talking of the politics of the Internet, which concerns itself with, for example, issues surrounding access, the political economies of production and the governance of the Internet (Leaning, 2000). Rather we regard, as do many other commentators, the small-scale opportunities, modifications and changes to people's lives that the Internet may offer as inherently political. We argue that in the social scientific analysis of the Internet and in particular the examination of politics and virtual communities, there have been a number of different ways in which the virtual community has been understood, or at least how it has been theorised. Our main contribution to the debate is to problematise the issue, to highlight that the virtual community is a term that has different interpretations and is not a point of consensus. Furthermore the study of the virtual community has been conducted through a particular political 'lens' and that some of the key ideas associated with the virtual community are deeply seated within a late modern, western political framework.

We commence this paper with a look at a populist yet important interpretation that regarded virtual communities in a rather uncritical manner. We then move to a more critical body of literature in which much is made of the restorative function of virtual communities; how they are helping to redress some of the damage inflicted upon civic life through the passage of Modernity. Three points need to be made in relation to this: first, in much of this work reference is made to the ideas of Jürgen Habermas (or at the very least Habermas' work prefigures, structures and sets the tone of the debate). Second, integrated into the ideas of the Habermasian 'public sphere' are particular ideas of identity politics and values (that were not present in Habermas' original work). Third, the focus upon issues of identity and the public sphere. We then discuss the idea of virtual community being closely linked to virtual identity and that the two should be considered in concert. From the numerous instances of virtual community identified in this paper, some concluding remarks are then given.

## The Idea of a 'Virtual Community'

When commentators and social scientists first started to examine the Internet and information and communication technologies other than as a form of technology, one of the main areas of interest was the way in which such technology was understood to be able to challenge the existing systems of media content distribution. A key facet in this argument is that the widespread deployment of the Internet will result in a shift in power away from the institutional producer and towards the consumer or user. McQuail notes how the use of media that function in a 'non-allocutory' (*allocutory* meaning media that disseminate information from a centre point to the periphery) or non-consultory (*consultory* meaning where recipients of a media must go to a central point to obtain information) sense may result in differing patterns in the operation of power (1986). Media that afford the user control over the flow of information at point of use and the opportunity to actually produce publicly consumable media content may result in a system that operates in a centrifugal fashion, dislodging power from a central position to outlying regions of civic life (McQuail, 1986).

Such a discourse finds strong resonance in the establishment of 'virtual communities' in the various inter-personal communication systems possible on the Internet. Virtual communities are often

understood as communities of choice rather than of geographical accident, spaces in which individuals can choose to communicate on a variety of issues (Rheingold, 1993). Jordan defines 'virtual communities' as follows:

Communities emerge in cyberspace when a number of users create avatars that return again and again to the same informational space. Individuals may find they are no longer alone in cyberspace but have developed relations with a number of other stable avatars and have become part of a virtual community. Virtual communities can be left easily because someone may choose to go there and so can choose not to (Jordan, 1999, p.100).

Attempts have also been made to offer more specific definitions. Jankowski gives an historical account of the multiple ways in which emerging technologies have been understood as possible saviours of declining forms of community (2002, pp.34-49). Fernback and Thompson contrast real communities with virtual ones and apply political science approaches (1995). Hakken (1999) utilises an ethnographic line of address and seeks to integrate anthropological theory into accounts of virtual communities. Wellman, who has published much research in this area, develops a community-sociology or positivist micro-sociological approach in their study of virtual communities (see, for example, Quan-Hasse, Wellman, Witte & Hampton, 2002; Wellman, 1997, 1999; Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, Gulia, & Haythornewaite 1996).

In many instances accounts of virtual communities revolve around popular-sociological notions such as the demise of 'real world' forms of communities in certain late-capitalist societies or the decline of 'values'. Rheingold, for example, utilising an instrumentalist (Leaning, 2005) conception of technology usage proposes 'one of the explanations for the virtual community phenomenon is the hunger for community that grows in the breasts of people around the world as more and more informal public spaces disappear from our real lives' (1993, p.6). Rheingold's work has been considerably criticised for this uncritical stance. Robins asserts that Rheingold seemingly ignores the commercial underpinning of the Internet and asserts that Rheingold's understanding of virtual communities is 'an escape from the real world of difference and disorder into a mythic realm of stability and order' (Robins, 1996, p.47).

In a similar vein to Rheingold, Schuler, with a more technological determinist approach, contends that virtual communities 'can - in concert with other efforts - play a positive role in rebuilding community by strengthening... core values' (1996, p.34). The emphasis is very much along liberal progressive lines and perhaps narrow conceptualisations of communities, core values and 'positive' roles. A more critical account of virtual communities lies in their theorisation within a model of the public sphere.

## **Virtual Communities and the Public Sphere**

McCarthy has observed that much contemporary interest in the public sphere arose in response to Habermas' sociological-historical account of the 'emergence, transformation, and disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere' (1994, p.xi). A central aspect of Habermas' thought that he has developed in his works (1985; 1987; 1992) concerns the emergence during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century of the public sphere, the 'sphere between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussion of matters of general interest was institutionally guaranteed' (McCarthy, 1994, p.xi). Habermas proposes that in early modern life there came into existence new forms of 'public life'. This 'public sphere' was a reaction to the monopolistic and absolutist control of political life by royal courts and involves the convergence of an emerging bourgeoisie and a section of the aristocracy separating from the royal court. Such new forms of civil association were, according to Habermas, to be considered the articulated rational opinions of elite private citizens. The opinions of

such private citizens, when expressed through publicly available media such as the printed booklets or in public spaces, allowed for the formation of a body of 'public opinion'. This public opinion replaced the existing situation in which the 'ruler's power was merely represented *before* the people with a sphere in which state authority was publicly monitored through informed and critical discourse by the people.' (McCarthy, 1994, p.xi).

In developing this model of the public sphere, Habermas proposes a multi-part account of political life. The first aspect is a 'system model' in which the political system is viewed as governed by the economic and administrative domains (Habermas, 1987, p.320). Outside of the economic world, a 'life-world' based upon transparent rational communication, enables private and public spheres, spaces of individual and social action. This notion of 'civil society', a realm beyond the merely economic, emphasises shared political effort and social organisation outside of the traditional political system. The public and private spheres are conceived of as separate from the economic world. Moreover, incursions of the system's economic rationality into the 'life-world' sphere are viewed as 'pathological' (Habermas, 1985).

Located in an account of French, German and British social and political history, Habermas' model sees the advent of universal suffrage and mass political participation resulting in a transformation of the public sphere. Problems related to the extension of the state into numerous areas of public life resulted in a crisis for the public sphere and a gradual 'refeudalisation' of social life. Developing further the Adornian inspired critique of the mass media prevalent within the Frankfurt School, the growth of mass communication is understood to contribute significantly to the decline of the bourgeois public sphere. Whereas the embryonic mass media had initially functioned as a facilitator for the emergence of the public sphere, the media's later corraling by commercial and state interests resulted in their becoming agents of control and systemically formulating public opinion for the benefit of an elite minority. Habermas proposes the solution to this dilemma of the decline of the public sphere lies in the salvaging of rational discourse and the general cleansing of society-wide communication pathways.

Habermas' work has been subject to substantial criticism and development. The idea of a sphere of activity separate from other elements of life proves difficult to substantiate. Fraser notes the necessity of the exclusive nature of the public sphere (1992a; 1992b). Only through exclusions of the proletariat, of women and its distinction from popular culture could the public sphere maintain its claims of rationality. Furthermore, the 'logo-centricity' of the public sphere, its relegation of other or 'non-rational' forms of discourse ensured its exclusive and elitist membership. Habermas' post-1989 work sought to remedy the inadequacies of his initial model by acknowledging the possibility of a multiplicity of spheres rather than a singular space:

Apart from introducing a greater internal differentiation of the bourgeois public sphere, which by means of a more detail-orientated focus could also be accommodated within my model, a different picture emerges if *from the very beginning* one admits the coexistence of competing public spheres and takes account of the dynamics of those processes of communication that are excluded from the dominant public sphere... the... structures of communication simultaneously give rise to the formation of several arenas where, beside the hegemonic bourgeois public sphere, additional subcultural or class specific public spheres are constituted on the basis of their own and initially not easily reconciled premises (Italics in original work) (Habermas, 1992, p.425).

While initially Habermas regarded other public spheres, such as the proletarian public sphere as 'derivative' (Downey & Fenton, 2003, p.87), he later conceded their potential:

Only after reading Mikhail Bakhtin's great book *Rabelais and His World*, have my eyes become really opened to the inner dynamics of a plebeian culture. The culture of the common people ap-

parently was by no means only a backdrop, that is a passive echo of the dominant culture; it was also the periodically recurring violent revolt of a counter-project to the hierarchical world of domination, with its official celebrations and everyday disciplines. (Habermas, 1992, p.427).

Habermas' model is firmly within a progressive discourse and seeks to salvage certain core aspects of the project of modernity that were seen to have been so badly savaged by 20<sup>th</sup> century history. However, the debate surrounding the publication of his work has resulted in a renaissance of work concerning the notion of the public sphere, public space, the role of the state in communication and the nature of political discourse (D'Entreves & Benhabib, 1997).

## The Internet and the Public Sphere

Some of the most marked modifications and adjustments to Habermas' theories have arisen after 1989 - in response to changes in advanced capitalist societies. As mentioned above, Habermas acknowledged certain problems with his initial description of the public sphere and made a number of modifications to his theory. In addition to the recognition of a plurality of public spheres, a number of authors have sought to utilise the notion of the public sphere in examining the Internet.

Poster (1995) drawing upon the idea that the Internet allows for direct interpersonal communication between interlocutors, asserts that the Internet may afford an opportunity to salvage aspects of the bourgeois public sphere. Additionally, the decentralised nature of Internet communication confers upon users a chance to engage in communication outside of the dominant systems of media hegemony. However, interpreting critiques of Habermas' description of the public sphere, Poster retains a degree of critical awareness in promoting the Internet. The post-modern subject, Poster asserts, is not the liberal subject of Habermas' original public sphere but an assemblage of multiple discursive roles.

A number of other authors have developed a similar notion but without the adherence to post-modern theorisation. Dertouzos asserts that new media such as the Internet will ensure that users of such technologies 'are capable of expressing their ideas, of communicating their apprehensions and requests openly' (1991, p.77). Similarly, Kellner notes the operation of the Internet as a place of effective oppositional action within the American intellectual community (1998). The Internet offers marginalised intellectuals, those denied access to more mainstream forms of media production, a means by which they may engage in debate. Dahlberg identifies a distinct trend in research related to the Internet and the public sphere (2001). Referred to by Dahlberg as 'deliberative democracy', this position advocated by authors such as Fernback (1997) and Moore (1999), proposes that the new technologies offer a means of rectifying the distortions to forms of communications from intrusive state bodies, and a reassertion of the bourgeois public sphere and idealised speech communities of early modernity. Similarly Bryan, Tsagarousianou and Tambini précis the arguments of the 'Civic Networking Movement' asserting that:

New media, and particularly computer-mediated communication, it is hoped, will undo the damage done to politics by the old media. Far from the telescreen dystopias, new media technology hails a rebirth of democratic life. It is envisaged that new public spheres will open up and that technologies will permit social actors to find or forge common political interests. People will actively access information from an infinite, free virtual library rather than receiving half-digested 'programming', and interactive media will institutionalise a right to reply (1998, p.5).

In another text in the same volume Tsagarousianou mitigates such euphoric and determinist claims by asserting that local political and cultural considerations play a key role in the process of technology enabling political action (1998). A number of authors continue this progressive reading of the Internet in relation to counter public spheres. Sassi, for example, describes the potential

of alternate political entities, operating solely through new media technologies, to offer an alternative to troubled 'real world' political entities (2001). Particular communicational technologies within the Internet have also been identified as being strongly tied to the re-development of public spheres. Much early work focused upon the use of Newsgroups in relation to political discussion. For example, Bentivegna examines the use of newsgroups in relation to discussion concerning Italian politics (1998; 2002). More recently, attention has moved away from newsgroups and towards the technologies and practices of web logs – often abbreviated to the colloquial 'blog' (see, for example, Tuomi, 2002).

Keane offers a multidimensional model drawing upon many of the criticisms mounted against Habermas' original account (2000). Keane proposes that amongst other changes the development and widespread deployment of the Internet within Western societies, and less so globally, has resulted in the emergence of three forms of public sphere operating at different distances from the individual. Keane uses the term 'macro-level' to describe communications technologies such as the Internet and satellite broadcasting and media structures such as the pan-national media organisations. For example, AOL-Time Warner permit a similar media experience to be shared by tens or hundreds of millions of individuals across a wide range of societies and cultures. In a similar vein, Beck proffers:

We could say people meet every evening around the world at the village green of television and consume the news. In this sense, the individual's situation can no longer even be determined or seen as institutionally dependent on nation states. They are part of a globally standardised media network (1992, p.133).

Such a contention is also supported by the notion that Internet audiences may be widely yet thinly distributed. Such macro-publics afford the possible integration into single, 'public of choice', geographically-disparate individuals. Keane contends that '(t)here is a category of users with a 'net presence' who utilize the medium... as citizens who generate controversies with other members of a far flung 'imagined community' about matters of power and principle' (2000, p.83). Keane cites the example of the Association of Progressive Communications as one such example of a geographically disparate community.

The second form of public sphere Keane refers to 'meso-level' public spheres, is a less recent historical phenomenon and consist of publics typically bounded by political or state boundaries. They also include those publics unified by a single self-defined notion of culture or ethnicity but distributed across often bordering states. They may further be notional minority nations within states. Typically, such publics are served by more traditional forms of media such as newspapers - a point raised by Harold Innis (1952). Nowell-Smith notes a similar role for state funded or mixed financed broadcasters (1991). Such forms of public, enabled by systems of mass-media, have a significant history and are understood to be of considerable longevity.

The third form of public sphere in Keane's model, 'micro-level' public spheres, are understood as those groups operating along new forms of social allegiance. Mellucci has described the (relatively) recent historical genesis of 'new social movements' such as the women's movement and the green movement (1980). Mellucci argues that such movements indicate a growing retreat from traditional forms of identification and the emergence of counter-public spheres within existing more micro-level spheres. Keane argues that the Internet, amongst other technologies, enables such micro-spheres.

An account of virtual communities enabled by the Internet seems to describe the re-establishment of a public sphere along the lines of both the macro and the micro public spheres that Keane identifies. The Internet affords action across national boundaries but also amongst small, interest-oriented groupings with alternative methods of identification to that found in the meso-sphere. As Ford and Gil contend, the Internet permits such spheres as 'it consists of peoples' participation in

creating interactive forms of communication that act as a countervailing force to the one way flows of inherent in commercial media' (2001, p.203). The interactive and inter-personal potential of the Internet offers considerable potential for the articulation of identities that lie outside of those forms that receive the majority of attention in mainstream media, typically offered by the meso-level Keane identifies.

The Internet is viewed as having a significant potential in the establishment of the public sphere on both a micro-and macro-level. Esteva and Prakash note that the formation of such new spaces is dependent upon the participation of entities separate from formal state institutions. Such civic organisations will be composed of 'autonomous, democratic civil society as it expresses itself in organisation independent of the state and its formal corporate structures' (1998, p.11). The Internet is understood to afford an opportunity for new space, a space separate from formal state sanctioned areas. Such new forms of politics, or new spaces enabled by the Internet have received considerable attention in academic studies.

## Virtual Identities

The study of the articulation of identities within computer-mediated communication has proven a profitable area of enquiry for researchers. Mitra's (1997) study of the 'South Asian Women's Network' notes that the Internet enables communication between members of national and ethnic communities who live in different regions. In addition to the obvious 'link-maintaining' benefits of such communities, it has been argued that such forums allow for the continuation of ethnic identities and ethnically-oriented Andersonian 'imagined communities'. For example, Mackay and Powell suggest that the Internet is a global technology which '...can contribute to a strengthening of cultural distinctiveness, and despite the placeless of the Internet, it can serve to reinforce place' (1997, p.203). Similarly, McClure studied the use and preservation of endangered languages on the Internet (2001). Such studies have also examined the ways in which digital invocations of ethnically-centred nations are articulated. These studies examine how self-defined ethnic groups have sought to deploy themselves in the new media. For example, Arnold and Plymire record the Native American Cherokees' web presence (2000). Similarly, Mallapragada explores the ways in which the Internet is integrated into existing communicative and communal practices within a diasporic community (2000).

In all of these accounts, the Internet is understood in an 'empowering' sense, offering new opportunities and bringing about a re-establishment or re-vitalisation of declining forms of community. Poster, in discussing Jewish identity argues that virtual identity affords an opportunity for the continuation of forms of identity 'The Internet, far from dissolving ethnicity, enables all Jews, wherever they are on the planet, to connect with one another. The Internet here is a neutral instrument of community, connecting pre-established ethnic identities' (1998, pp.205-206).

Understood in this way, the Internet allows individuals to express a form of identification when distanced from their (real or imagined) traditional geographical site of instantiation. Indeed, the widespread use of the Internet, or more particularly those aspects that afford the development of such virtual communities, may be understood as occupying a central role in the establishment and maintenance of such identities and communities. The Internet instrumentally affords opportunities and may also be understood to foster, encourage or even bring about in a deterministic sense, such new modalities of community and new avenues for identity articulation.

Bakker notes, however, that many of the communities studied on the Internet are constituted by individuals located not in the geographical site of signification, rather, they are often diasporic communities (or disenfranchised indigenous communities in the case of the Native American Cherokees noted earlier). Bakker argues that 'in most cases the webmasters...do not live in their regions of birth but in the USA, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Canada' (1999).

This is a key issue as the seeming quest for identity and community identified in much of the research above is not confined to technologies such as the Internet. Numerous sociologists argue that one of the key features of the late Modernity experienced by contemporary western societies is the centralisation of identity as a project. Defining what we are, to which community we belong to and who are 'our people', is a particular endeavour for those living in late capitalist societies. Giddens argues that it the very nature of late modern societies, the rapid transitions and transformations mean that the traditional means of forming our identities are replaced by a more personalised process:

Transitions in individuals' lives have always demanded psychic reorganisation, something that was often ritualised in traditional cultures in the shape of *rites de passage*. But in such cultures, where things stayed more or less the same from generation to generation on the level of the collectively the changed identity was more or less staked out – as when an individual moved from adolescence into adulthood. In the settings of modernity, by contrast, the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change (1991, p.32-33).

In high or later modernity defining ones identity becomes a personalised task, something we choose to engage in. Indeed Giddens argues that 'the self becomes a *reflexive project*' (1991, p.32), a quest that those in developed economies of the West engage in.

## Concluding Remarks

In this paper we have examined some key ideas surrounding the concept of the virtual community. We have shown that in the social scientific analysis of the Internet and in particular the examination of politics and virtual communities, there have been a number of different ways in which the virtual community has been understood, or at least how it has been theorised. The numerous instances of virtual community identified and the large amounts of theorisation of such phenomenon in the literature on virtual communities may be understood as illustrative of the dominance of the motifs of identity and community in late-modern societies. In summary, we argue that in addition to such phenomenon actually occurring, the study of community and identity in relation to the Internet may also be part of the dominance of such themes in societies in which the Internet has traditionally been studied.

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