

Community and CMC: the virtual absence of online communal being-ness

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Abstract

This paper proposes to examine the close relationship between the social sciences and offline interests (government, business, media, and all general non-CMC communities) as a key to investigating how the internet came to be what it is today. It argues that potential online educational benefits, as well as more general benefits from projects of social cohesion and community building, are being limited by the manner in which the internet is conceived and constructed; that for projects and benefits to be realised and to be potentially available to governments the net needs to be conceived in a different manner.

This paper seeks to understand why the discursive formation of 'community of interest' has come to dominate and shape the contemporary internet. It argues that this domination limits the possibilities of CMC by giving privileges to certain relationships, principally uni-polar forms, and thus hinders the potential of the internet for educational and community building processes.

Finally, it suggest ways in which a differently conceived CMC might encourage the internet's rebirth as a genuine social and public space.

Keywords: community, technology, IT, communication, community, society

Definitions:

CMC can be defined in two ways: a broad definition where Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is defined as any communicative transaction which occurs through use of two or more networked computers (McQuail, 2005) or a narrow technologically determined definition which stresses popular forms of interactive CMC, including email, video, audio or text, chat, conferencing, instant messaging, bulletin boards, list-serves, and weblogs. In this paper CMC is being defined broadly, as per McQuail's definition.

Two definitions of Community

In *'Conceptualising Community: beyond the state and the individual'* (Studdert, 2006) it is argued that in the traditional sociological approach (widely shared among social scientists) community is positioned as a passive, apolitical object, defined from an unacknowledged Archimedean point, intrinsically beset with problems or potential, reductively discursive, characterized by a foundational utility, open to instrumental usage by one project or another, powerless, transparent, narrow and essentialist.

Studdert also argues that within this traditional sociological approach 'community' could never be described inter-relationally or as a unity important unto itself. Thus the claim here is that traditional social scientific conceptualisation situates CMC community within a pre-given, but unacknowledged framework (Bauman, 2001) which constrains the possibilities offered by the internet as a social space. Rather, what typifies traditional investigation is a series of questions centred around what afflicts community (Giddens (1998), Putnam (1993, 2000), or, in the case of CMC communities in particular, what offline interest(s) it can serve and how it will develop. These questions nullify other questions and lines of enquiry, principally relating to what community does as a social formation, and how inter-relationality functions to create communal being-ness.

Suffice to say that within this traditional view of community, an online community is a social formation constituting some or all of the three following requirements

- Simple entry and presence in CMC online (Etzioni and Etzioni, 1997)
- An activity in common (Wenger, 1984)
- Sociality (ie any social interaction at all)

However there is an alternate view of community which states that the static term 'community' is substituted by the phrase 'communal being-ness' which acknowledges the dynamic, actioned nature of social interaction. Thus communal being-ness is defined as ongoing dynamic sociality between groups of whatever size, whose conduct when with each other is governed tacitly by certain conventions. These conventions are maintained by a dynamic interaction of communal power and co-operation, and which always contains within it, in addition to the particular manifestation of the actioned sociality itself, all elements, subjective and objective, of the wider 'web of relations' (Arendt, 1958).

This definition explicitly acknowledges that Community is not an object, but is an inter-relational hybrid activity in which the actions of multiple communality contain, create and hold meanings, power and identity of that community. Thus this version of 'communal being-ness' is not a pure mechanistic formulation isolated from other demarcated entities and united only in the workings of the mechanistic 'society' machine (Latour, 1993; Studdert, 2006). The contrast between these two approaches establishes the foundation for the argument and for the investigation of the various accounts of CMC and online community, as well as providing the basis for extrapolation regarding the possible and probable futures of online community.

Research

Academic research into online communities falls neatly into two categories: works offering some generalised account of 'online communities', or the specifically ethnographic works studying one online site in detail.

Category one – overview: General philosophical

This work largely stems from Rheingold's 'The Virtual Community' (1993). Since the publication of this landmark work, discussion regarding CMC has centred on the formulation and practices of online community. Rheingold's work studied different forms of CMC including The Well, Usenet, internet relay chat rooms and various multi-user sites principally MUD. Its notions of community were largely linked to practices involving a narrow version of CMC, and Rheingold had a preference towards the more 'exotic' uses of the internet – chat rooms and so on – which were more predominant in early CMC activity. His work predicts potential benefits from online communities and suggests online community would be the outcome of the accumulation of 'social feeling' sourced in sustained public discussion, utilizing the opportunities CMC presented.

Rheingold remains the leading name among early theorists who viewed CMC and the internet in a progressive light. Over the intervening period many other commentators have pointed in various discussions to the potential offered by CMC.

Kollack (1999) offered a taxonomy drawn from cognitive psychology which suggested three non-altruistic user motivations for participating in online communities. Others utilize the work of Putnam to claim that virtual communities developed bonds enhancing ties of social capital and civic engagement. According to the early online social capital theorists Blanchard and Horan (1998) these qualities are best achieved when online communities are situated in an "encompassing community" (see also Wellham, B. et al (2001).

Many commentators such as Preece (2000, 2004) provide suggestions which could the feeling of community being-ness online. Preece draws attention to the pitfalls of the new medium and indicates that enhanced technology could be the best means to overcome aspects of CMC sociality not conducive to communal feeling. Like Kollack (1999), Preece constructs a taxonomy for CMC communication within a particular chat room and classifies postings with psychological qualities, some of which are deemed valuable and conducive for communal being-ness.

Castells (2000) views CMC networks as the fundamental unit of emerging modern society where key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information networks. He distinguishes this mode of network from previous long standing social networks by asserting that online networks "process and manage information and are using micro-electronic-based technologies" (Castells, 2000). According to Castells "networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies", a claim which, of course, links him to a wider search by Giddens (1990, 1994) and others (Fukuyama, 1995; Wittle, 2001) for some new social space, as well as with claims that these new social networks represent a qualitatively different form of community and inter-relationality, one replacing old notions of community bound together by location. Of course this attempt to assert and locate a 'new non-political space' (Honig, 1993) is characteristic of liberal political theory (Joseph, 1988), as it is the very claim to difference and radicality in which these approaches locate themselves (Descombes, 1993).

Wellman is another who speaks of networks (1996) which, though they have limited social presence, often allow communication that is uninhibited, creative and blunt. He also uses social capital notions of strong, intermediate and weak ties. Etzioni and Etzioni (1997) list the virtues of online and offline communities and the different social roles they can fulfill. Many authors stress issues like the impact of CMCs on local communities (Mele, 1999; Castells, 2002) or the problems associated with a two-tiered information society and questions around inclusion (Wegerif, 1998; Preece, 2002; McConnell, 2000). Others explore how technologies can impact and improve upon democratic practices (Barber, 2002; Biesta and Lawy 2006; Kerr, 2005). The capacity to dissolve boundaries has also been a frequent topic: Lipnack and Stamps (1997) and Mowshowitz (1997) point out how virtual communities can work across space and time, for instance. Others

refer to the web's freedom for the assumption of identity pointing to Second Life and game playing sites as examples (McKenna, 2004).

Other topics include social identity (Campbell, 2004; Wood and Smith, 2005; Thomas, 2007), group process (Garton et al, 1997; Siegal et al, 2002), educational possibilities derived from online community building (Michinov, Michinov and Toczec-Kapellel, 2004); creating emotional resonance conducive to communal behavior offline (Schrock, Holden and Reid, 2004); linguistic signifiers conducive to positive CMC in online settings (Barab, Kling and Gray, 2004; Herring, 2004), codes of conduct for CMC communal spaces (Rheingold, DATE?) encouragement of certain emotions (Preece, 2002).

Recently there have been a series of theoretical papers using concepts derived from other disciplines: Ma and Agarwal (2007), Wilson, and Peterson (*Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2002) among those utilising the notion of artefacts from archaeology, applying the term to non-material objects such as online reputation and utilising social psychological tools to create a model of interaction.

In recent years commentaries have turned to problems of methodology. Moheddiian (2004) suggests that static communication dominates research, and attempts to develop a methodology and uniformly define community. Schimdt (2007) proposes a general model for comparative analysis of the different uses of the blog format. Buchan interrogates limitations of current methodological approaches (2000), while Rutter and Smith (1999) and Gatson and Zweerink (2004) question the limitations and opportunities presented for ethnographers in online CMC research.

Some authors, such as Kim (2007), in fact, have even gone so far as to contest this notion of CMC as inherently democratic, pointing to the potential difference between structured online communities (message boards, chat rooms, etc, of the sort more predominant overall in Rheingold's time), and more recent individual-centric, bottom-up social tools (blogs, instant messaging). Kim suggests the latter are gaining in popularity, and her comments could be applied just as easily to privatized dedicated social sites such as MySpace and Facebook. Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, and Elijah L. Wright centre their investigation around the difference between online practice and public discourses. In particular they pose interesting questions concerning why female and teen bloggers are under-represented in public discourse about weblogs.

Finally, it should be noted that within these studies there is a characteristic blurring of boundaries principally around the usage of the key terms CMC and community. It is never quite clear whether CMC is limited to a narrow technical definition or whether it includes the entire internet. There is also a conceptual blurring around the term 'community', which is a long standing traditional social science practice (Studdert, 2006).

Ethnographic studies

Recent years have seen a plethora of what can be broadly described as ethnographic studies of various online sociality, usually on a specific site. This strand of research presents ethnography as the emerging tool for online research (Thomson, et al (1998); Ward, (1999); Sack-Beck. (2004)). Clearly this work functions as a reaction against the work described in strand 1, much of which is now seen as ungrounded in actual online practices. The papers themselves utilise a wide array of methodologies to investigate online community such as discourse analysis, grounded theory, social psychology.

Recently commentators have studied older Chinese groups (Xie, 2008), female fan sites (Bury, 2005), cancer communities (Tamar, 2008), chat rooms Merchant, 2001; Trochia, Janda, 2002), ESL learning communities (Zhang, 2007), Chinese political bulletin boards (Robert, 2007), skinheads (Campbell, 2006), health groups (Maloney-Krichmar; Preece, 2005), general blog sites (Hookway, 2008; Williams, 2007), same sex attracted sites (Yip, Dowsett, Williams, Ventuneac; Carbello-Diegeuz, 2008), just to name a few.

Overall the findings are rather uniform although several key elements are common to virtually all accounts: various forms of technical CMC's facilitate various psychologically defined qualities, there is sociality online, the groups created online are largely 'communities of interest', and the online space exists overwhelmingly as an adjunct and facilitating tool for pre-existing off line communities.

The commonality of these findings sits side by side with the constant presence of micro-suggestions that tend to concentrate upon adjustments to technology. The accounts of these studies also exhibit a subtle displacement. In these ethnographic studies, there is barely a mention on any specifically online derived communal being-ness. In 'Creating a Sense of Community: Experiences in a Swedish chat room' (Sveningsson, 2003), for example, the transcribed conversations show less engagement overall than might be found in a conversation you might have with a stranger in a queue. The transcripts show social interaction certainly, but it is short, hesitant and superficial. Nor is this diminished social interaction uncommon within these ethnographic accounts.

What is revealed in many of these accounts is not 'communal being-ness' in the sense describe earlier, but rather commonality, the commonness of being, the commonality of the mass, the customer, the citizen. This widespread investigative slippage between communal being-ness and commonality is exemplified by the influential educational work of Wenger who defines community of practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, 2002).

This traditional definition positions community as an empty stage where communities appear through a simple conjunction of individual interest, much in the same way that mushrooms appear after rain. Wenger's approach confirms Dumont's point that in traditional social sciences we pass from the individual to the communal only in terms of a conscious design (Dumont, 1983). This is a major problem for these accounts and though many allude to it, few interrogate it directly. And the reason it is a major problem brings us back to the central question of this section: if there is a unique social formation termed online community, then it surely must be created within CMC and the online space. In the light of this question, it is telling that these ethnographic studies contain virtually no sociality derived specifically from online settings.

To summarise, these ethnographic accounts show two overwhelming tendencies within CMC practice: offline communal being-ness dominates the construction of online identities and online meanings, and there is virtually no sociality derived specifically from online settings.

The next section argues that these two contradictory findings explain each other; for if existing identities are filling the space of online sociality, where is the space from which something specifically communal and specifically online can emerge?

Argument

So the question is "why?" Why has the social network of the web spectacularly failed to produce any sign of online communal being-ness.

Studdert believes it clearly relates to two issues: the predominance of offline interests, and the mode of investigation.

Offline interests, ie identities created and sustained outside online CMC space, utterly dominates the contemporary internet. These range from government laws or legislation, government agencies' codes of practice, information sites, health education sites, through business sites, sites specifically relating to bodily identity, same sex attracted sites, third age sites, sites for cancer sufferers, through educational spaces to privatised spaces of sociality like MySpace, Facebook and Second Life. All these sites offer some

form of CMC to facilitate social interactions and indeed, CMC permeates the contemporary internet.

These sites of interest construct a narrow one-to-one relationship inherently at odds with the notion of communal being-ness. In fact it is far closer to the privileged and defining social relationship of both the state and the social sciences, that is, the state/individual axis. Interest is an inherently individual pursuit and constructs a relationship which is therefore inherently a rational choice made prior to entry into an online setting. As such it excludes community from any role in the construction of subjectivity or communal power.

Tsure argues that even apparently named social sites like 'MySpace' and 'Second Life' are sites not for online sociality, but for information, display and individual construction of identities (Tsure, 2008). To identify these sites of interest as community is to erect an inherently impoverished form of community confined to the singularity of the state/individual axis. The predominance of uni-dimensional relationships drives multi dimensional CMC, communal multiplicity and hybridity to the margins of the internet.

This figure of the rational individual is cast online and in the online literature in many lights: client, blogger, stakeholder, life-styler, user, lurker, poster, cancer survivor. These are all individualised roles where the terms of the singular relationship are decided somewhere else. If communing exists within this framework it is nothing more than the commonality of individual interest and role. Unfortunately, for notions of online community, they constitute the predominant form of social interaction on the web.

The degree to which sociality within the online space is controlled by offline identities and interests ranges across a spectrum. Clearly at one end lie the online service locations, exemplified by the 'pay your road tax on line' sites. Here, one is being ascribed a pre-existing identity by passing through a series of previously defined, codified and understood steps, and this action of sociality – the passing through the steps – allows the individual to be recognised and inscribed as a citizen. Sociality in these cases is almost entirely commonality as a citizen. There is no space for any unique online sociality. In these circumstances the unique sociality from which cooperative communality is formed (Arendt, 1958) is utterly absent. Similarly, in business sites, CMC is exclusively one-to-one and again a series of demarcated steps agreed in advance guide the buyer and inscribe an identity. Once again CMC serves simply to shape the identity created prior to the online sociality and in doing so leaves no space for unique sociality.

This sort of privileging of interest is even present at the other end of the spectrum in blogger sites, where invariably a moderator and a code of practice have the overwhelming influence in shaping what is apparently a social space into an individualistic and known form. The primacy ascribed to the social relationship of interest above all others limits and relegates multi dimensionality. There is no horizontal CMC discussion across online site barriers demarcated by interest, nor is it encouraged, for example, that road tax payers should use the online service to talk to other road tax payers, much less 'MySpace' users, in one simultaneous online action of CMC.

The privileging of interest has constructed an internet not of multi-dimensionality or online communal being-ness, but rather one demarcated to the extreme. It has effectively closed the online space to moments of unique sociality necessary for any communal being-ness to develop. For this reason it has become almost impossible to speak of an online community in the wider inter-relational sense, because quite simply very little unique sociality is found online.

In the development of the internet, the state and the social sciences have held a mirror to each other. The current mirroring regarding online communities is illustrated in all the

ethnographic accounts. Not only are the studies dominated by the framing concept of interest, there is little multi-dimensionality beyond the interest, little contact outside the demarcated spaces and aside from some minor linguistic tropes, which could simply represent a one time outcome of adjusting to the keyboard, little sign of anything unique to the online space itself. It is clear why a community of interest, so designated by the social sciences and created by offline interests, represents a limiting of the possibilities for both a richer, denser web and something creative of online communal being-ness.

Futures

Is it possible for CMC to be used and configured in a manner which allows the inter-relational hybridity and multiplicity creative of communal being-ness online to emerge? Is it possible for instance, to envisage an online educational CMC space that is productive of communal being-ness? It is accepted that such online classrooms require a multi-dimensional CMC sociality and that having such an online environment appears to improve people's sense of community (Lysoff, 2003) What would that sort of CMC space look like, if these findings were generalised across the web?

Possible and Probable Futures

The state and various aligned hierarchies of power continue to shape and contain CMC and online sociality in line with their general position as the defining agent of the social (Bauman, 2003). Hand in hand, the social sciences, in line with its role as the 'ideology of modernism' (Bauman, 2003), continue to term these static formations 'communities' and thus continue to provide the state and aligned entities with the ammunition to do exactly the same. This creates a situation productive of results entirely predictable from both parties and for CMC online interaction.

This result, needless to say, also diminishes the social potential for the internet simply because it produces inherently limiting forms of social relationships. Thus educational projects, projects of social cohesion and community building are also inherently limited, both by how initially the possibilities are conceived, and the manner in which this impacts upon the net in real CMC interaction. Thus, for example, we will see the uptake of CMC facilitating interaction such as the Nesai online classroom as a means of dealing with excluded students and children in care who require an education. However, the technology itself simply duplicates the socially constructed hierarchy of the predominant educational setting, rather than positioning itself as a multi dimensional horizontal mode of communicative interaction.

It is envisaged that more demarcated health sites and sites supposedly dedicated to establishing links between various interest groups, such as the elderly, the medicalised, the 'disabled', the expatriate and so on will appear. In this future, online space and CMC will continue in an overwhelmingly uni-directional form, as an outcome of financial imperatives, and guided by the domination of offline interests. In such circumstances the process will contain mutually interdependent elements of surveillance and control (Rose 1999) accompanied by good intentions of the liberal variety in the service of idealised and noble causes.

In such a scenario, CMCs that currently offer an online space for relatively unmediated conversation will become marginalised and heavily moderated. Additionally, the internet itself is becoming openly censored either through filtering or legislation of the sort recently introduced in Australia, and this will continue.

Preferable Future

The fact that there is currently barely a ripple of a specifically derived CMC online communality is not because such communal being-ness is impossible, but rather because of the way in which the contemporary internet has been created.

In relation to academic approaches a number of inter-relational strands are currently emerging, which utilise a variety of work ranging from Latour to Deleuze. An interrelation and longitudinal study (Studdert, 2007), based on the development of the skeletal inter-relational outline of Arendt (1958), discovered online communal being-ness in which a specific communal identity-in-common was created and sustained online. This work centred around a blog site and involved a group of approximately twenty to forty regular posters. More such work of this nature is clearly required. However, such an interrelational approach presents possibilities for enlarging our capacity to actually perceive communal being-ness. Furthermore it touches directly upon our capacity to imagine a different internet.

Is it possible, for instance, to conceive of a CMC space deeper and wider in its communicative reality, with general inter-relatedness throughout and truly empowering CMC technology? Is it possible to imagine a situation where the internet functions as an untrammelled space for the action of sociality and does so in circumstances allowing all manner of interaction?

For that to happen online space must be open to the possibility of its own unique sociality. Such an internet fundamentally requires the overturning of the privileging of interest both within the web itself and within social science literature.

Early theorists conceived of CMC as creative of an open, multi-dimensional space where social action and communal being-ness were prioritised over all other elements. Ethnographic research simply confirms that this is the polar opposite of the way in which CMC has developed. The elevation of interest as the defining totem of social interaction has given us a stunted and impoverished version of community in the online space. A new vision of the web centred around the idea of online space as first and foremost a public space is required. This space would be every bit as public as the street, and where whatever government intervention occurs should be governed, just as it is on the streets and in other offline spaces, by laws and procedures, regulating and restricting not the communal but the state itself. Business presence should also be low key, serving online maintenance costs only. Whatever form governance of the web takes it should be accountable to users, not to governments, to the communal being-ness and not to the dictates of interest.

The potential for fully utilising the possibilities of CMC are vast - in education, in community building, in offsetting social alone-ness and disconnection. For these reasons the potential of CMC must be realised. The first step to realising this is to conceive of community and communal being-ness in a different way, which allows offline interests to appreciate and encourage different forms of CMC sociality.

The work of Lysoff (2003) indicates how little of this CMC potential has been exploited in the service of education, or, for that matter, in the service of the social as a whole. The fact that the opportunity to create this sort of socially centred internet was bypassed in the age of neo-liberalism is perhaps no surprise, but it is still potential to be realised and it is still possible to realise it. Online CMC needs to be re-imagined in a manner centred on the privileging of a widespread multi-dimensionality and an inter-relational hybridity of social and public space. This would be a socially determined online space, where perhaps even communities of dis-interest could emerge.

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