

Identity, Community and the Internet

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Community and Identity

It is part of the symbolic interactionist *credo* that a person's identity is derived from his/her relations with others and from the imagination of the others' perceptions and evaluations. As put by Charles Cooley a century ago:

"In a very large and interesting class of cases the social reference takes the form of a somewhat definite imagination of how one's self--that is any idea he appropriates--appears in a particular mind, and the kind of self-feeling one has is determined by the attitude toward this attributed to that other mind. A social self of this sort might be called the reflected or looking glass self:

*"Each to each a looking-glass
Reflects the other that doth pass."*

As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it. A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal element: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification."

From: *Human Nature and the Social Order*. New York: Scribner's, 1902. Pp179 -185

The creation and maintenance of identity is a communicative process based on a continuous process of interpersonal comparisons and judgements, reflecting past experience and cultural guidelines. There is a close connection between personal identity and group identity: an acknowledgement of membership in a community of people like oneself. At the same time, the negotiation of both personal and group identity involves distinctions from those who are perceived to be different.

Historically the friction associated with communicating across time and space has been high. For most of human history daily interaction with others has been confined to those sharing time and space. Proximity and physical community have been defining elements in the creation and maintenance of identity. The answer to the question "Where are you from?" has provided a base for group identification and a label for distinguishing members of the group from others. The evolution of new

forms of communication that allow time and space constraints to be overcome has broken this link and provides a new basis for both community and identity.

The relationship between identity and community is encapsulated in the definition of communities as “networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity” (Wellman, 2001: 18).

By the middle of the twentieth century it was apparent that developments in communications technology were rendering obsolete the concept of the community as a physically bounded place characterised by the sort of relationships which early social scientists treated as primary groups. The “urban mosaic”, envisaged by Wirth (1938) and the other Chicago human ecologists, composed of distinct physical neighbourhoods providing a backdrop for differentiated ways of life, has been replaced by a system which owes more to social space than to physical geography. Castells (1996-2000; 2001) outlines the way in which a society based on local communities and other closed groups is being replaced by new sets of social structures which can be characterised as forming the “Network Society”. Wellman, a pioneer of an approach to community based on the analysis of networks of relationships, points out that in Western society at the beginning of the twenty-first century

“Communities are far-flung, loosely bounded, sparsely knit, and fragmentary. Most people operate in multiple, thinly connected, partial communities as they deal with networks of kin, neighbours, friends, workmates and organisational ties. Rather than fitting into the same group as those around them, each person has his or her own ‘personal community’” (Wellman, 2001: 17).

The corollary of this is that each person may also maintain multiple identities.

Online Relationships

The development of the Internet has greatly increased the possibility for creating and maintaining multiple relationships, some of which may only exist in cyberspace. The growth of computer mediated communications has accompanied and supported the development of what Anthony Giddens describes as a more reflexive, individualistic society. To inhabitants of cyberspace new forms of community based on shared cyberplaces become possible. To those who are connected, computer mediated communications offer the opportunity to search for information, support and affirmation of identity regardless of the constraints of time and geography. Much of the information searched for may be trivial, say relating to the time and cost of travel, but other forms of information may relate literally to matters of life and death. Browsing the Internet to search for medical information is, apparently, the second most frequent form of surfing (after searching for pornography and other sex-related activities). Sufferers from rare – or indeed common – medical conditions can check the diagnosis and treatment being suggested by their own physician, seek alternative remedies or seek support from others sharing their experience through joining an on-line support group.

The ability of users to control what aspects of themselves to reveal makes the Internet particularly appealing to those suffering – or believing that they suffer – from potentially embarrassing or stigmatising conditions. As the New Yorker cartoon put it: “On the Web, nobody knows you’re a dog”. Equally, nobody need know that you’re a member of a stigmatised racial group, are blind, disfigured, a spotty adolescent – or any other devalued status. Reid (2000: 35) points out

“The freedom to obscure or re-create aspects of the self on-line allows the exploration and expression of multiple aspects of human existence. The research on virtual communities is filled with tales of masks for age and race, gender and class; masks for almost every aspect of identity”.

The disembodied nature of online interaction, especially if it is enacted through relatively low bandwidth communication channels such as email or other text-based forms, provides a great deal of scope for deliberate or accidental deception. Online, a person can adopt any name or handle they like and one person can attempt to maintain many different identities.

The freedom of the Internet enables people to experiment with self presentation, but along with the freedom come several dangers. Reid (2000: 35) comments:

“The projection of the self into the virtual has been talked about as freeing the self from the confines of the actual – as opening up possibilities for exploration – as something to be celebrated and embraced. However, these tales do not always have happy endings.”

A number of dangers have been identified. The ability of presenters to control what aspects of themselves to make available on the Internet is by no means absolute, but does open up possibilities for deliberate deception or accidental misinterpretation.

Establishing the authenticity of online communication is difficult (Harasim, 1993); some people may alter small portions of their personal information (e.g. hair colour, age, weight, income), others may change their identities altogether, adopting “virtual identities” far removed from those presented in daily face-to-face relationships. Donath (1999: 51) points out that “Compared to the physical world it is relatively easy to pass as someone else online since there are relatively few identity cues.”

Gender swapping is reputed to be a common experience, especially in chat rooms and online games. Several authors (e.g. Bornstein, 1994; O’Brien 1998; Wiley, 1995) have investigated the adoption on the net of an alternate gender identity (generally, reflecting the early gender imbalance in Internet usage, males passing themselves off as females). Turkle (1995: 212) suggests that it is relatively easy for a man to present himself as a female online. In order to pass as a woman offline a man may have to “shave various parts of his body, wear make-up, perhaps a wig, a dress, and high heels, perhaps change his voice, walk and mannerisms”. Online it may, initially at least, be a simple question of changing his sign-off – though maintenance of a false gender identity may be difficult over a longer period of time. Other forms of experimentation may involve passing oneself off as being of a different age or a member of a different ethnic group than is actually the case. Motives for such deception range from innocent curiosity to more sinister reasons, but the success with which the new identities can be maintained may be as much attributable to

existing stereotypes of behaviours and attitudes as to the role-playing ability of the impersonator. The success of the deception also, of course, depends on the readiness of the other actors involved to accept and react to the proffered identity. As in all relationships, in order to make sense of the interaction, participants need to be able to construct personifications of each other which are consistent with observed behaviours.

Even when there is no deliberate attempt to mislead, the relative paucity of contextual cues generally available online, provides opportunities for the recipients of messages to read in more – or less – than was intended.

The impact of deception and of discovering that one has been deceived will, of course, vary according to the seriousness of the actions involved and the extent to which the relationship has become invested with emotional salience. One oft-quoted extreme concerns the experiences of participants in *JennyMUSH*, a virtual community designed to provide support for victims of sexual abuse (Reid, 1996). In its early days, *JennyMUSH* appears to have been a valuable source of support for its members, providing a safe environment for people to share experiences and emotional confirmation. The emotional frailty of the community was exposed by the activities of an anonymous individual who changed her/his nominal gender from female to male, assigned himself the identity of ‘Daddy’ and then engaged in an act of “virtual rape”, sending graphic messages to the other participants depicting violent sexual assault. The activity was stopped after half an hour when an administrator became aware of what was happening, but the harm done was long-lasting and the community was blown asunder. “Where a feeling of safety and privacy had reigned there now existed distrust and wariness” (Reid, 1998: 32). A similar story is reported by Dibbel (1999) in his analysis of the Mr Bungle case, an instance of personalised virtual rape in *LambdaMOO*. An even earlier example is the story of “Joan”, a male psychiatrist who posed as a handicapped woman, entered an online support group for women with disabilities, seduced other participants into trying “lesbian cybersex” and then faked “her” own death. Her/his subsequent exposure gave rise to considerable emotional stress among those with whom she had been in contact (Van Gelder, 1991).

Virtual rape is a rare and extreme crime; much more common is the tendency for participants in online relationships to indulge in behaviours which appear relatively disinhibited when compared with the norms of face-to-face interaction. The tendency of text-based computer mediated communication to result in disinhibited behaviour, expressing considerable emotional volatility, has been remarked upon by a number of authors.

A positive effect of the disinhibiting effects of cyberspace is seen in the success of online self-help groups. There are innumerable self-help groups in the Internet, each composed of individuals who share experiences which they might otherwise be loathe to admit and who engage in high levels of self-disclosure. At a lower level of emotional intensity it may be observed that a similar effect appears in online tutorials, where students who may remain silent in face-to-face class-rooms readily participate in discussions in bulletin boards.

Less positive effects of disinhibition online include instances of flaming, the expression of extreme views on such matters as gender, race or politics, and the whole area of cyber-pornography. The ease with which the posters of messages on the Internet can disguise or hide their identity makes it relatively easy for them to express views that they would be unlikely to admit to in the face-to-face situation.

Virtual Communities

As in “real” life, online interaction is channelled into more-or-less structured forms. Using one of the standard definitions of community as a persisting network of relations, Rheingold (1993, p.5) has popularised the use of the term “virtual community” to describe community formations online:

“Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on ... public discussion long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.”

Describing the experience of participating in one of the earliest on-line communities, the WELL, a text-based bulletin board system run in California, Rheingold (1993:3) notes

“People in virtual communities...exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. You can't kiss anybody and nobody can punch you on the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries.”

To participate successfully in a virtual community, members need to establish consistent identities. Their membership in one virtual community does not, however, preclude membership in others, or, indeed, in a variety of “real” communities. Early concerns that people who spend a considerable amount of time on the ‘Net may withdraw from other forms of interpersonal contact have found little support in empirical surveys. Membership of virtual communities may be at the expense of watching television, but does not appear to result in any general withdrawal from personal relationships. Internet communication increases the range of possible social networks that a person can connect to and adds elements of diversity:

“computer supported social networks are not destroying community, but are responding to, resonating with, and extending the types of community that have already become prevalent in the developed Western world.”
(Wellman, 1997: 185-6)

The ability of the Internet to support membership in a multitude of virtual communities has been heralded by service suppliers. The separation of community from the immediate constraints of physical geography reduces pressures to conform to one set of group expectations. Through searching out like-minded individuals in

cyberspace the individual has relative freedom to find virtual communities which will support whatever identity he wishes to project. British Telecom advertises the way in which a woman may be a quiet office clerk by day and an extrovert wizard with magical powers in an online community at night. At other times she may also, of course, be a mother, a wife, a shopper and a member in a far-flung network of friends and kin. Some of these relationships may be carried out electronically; others may require physical presence.

Virtual Community and Local Community

Although it is undeniable that electronic communications have greatly attenuated the impact of geography on people's experiences and that the Internet enables personal relationships to be maintained almost regardless of time and space, where one lives in geographical space still has an effect. To let it be known that one lives in one part of a city rather than another, let alone in one country than another, still possesses social relevance. How does local community relate to virtual community?

Early writers on the impact of the Internet on local communities (e.g. Doheny-Farina, 1996) believed that the spread of the Internet was incompatible with the preservation of strong geographical communities; most later writers have seen electronic communication as being another means for (re-)creating community.

The belief that the Internet can provide a foundation for strengthening local community provides the mainspring for what has been termed the Community Networking movement, devoted to the use of local computer-based networks as means of enhancing local identities.

Beamish (1997) points out:

“Unlike the similarly named "on-line communities" or "virtual communities", community networks are based on a physical place - what participants have in common are their cities and neighbourhoods.”

The coincidence of online and offline relationships characteristic of a community network (or “local net”) provides a potent force for the reinforcement of solidarity and community feeling. According to Blanchard and Horan (1998: 293):

“social capital and civic engagement will increase when virtual communities develop around physically based communities and when these virtual communities foster additional communities of interest.”

As the visible face of the local community a local net provides an important element in establishing its identity.

The Construction of Community Identity on the 'Net

The construction and maintenance of community identity can be described in terms that are similar to those referring to individual identity. In a symbolic interactionist perspective, community identity is negotiated in a process of interaction with others. The process is reflexive, involving imagination of others' reactions as well as direct

representation. Communities that acquire a damaged reputation, for example through press reports, may find it hard to shake off the negative connotations which their very name denotes. The use of local nets provides a possible escape and it is not a coincidence that much of the effort devoted to the development of community nets has been located in what have been perceived to be marginalised communities. It is part of the UK Government's social inclusion policy that access to the 'Net is perceived as being a vital component of attempts to include the excluded.

At its simplest the establishment of a local net may provide a means for (re)creating the "shared ways of thinking, believing, perceiving, and evaluating" that are among the defining characteristics of an integrated community (Broom and Selznick, 1977: 56). Etzioni (1998:xiii) captures the essence of this approach to community in his definition of communities as "webs of social relations that encompass shared meanings and above all shared values". The development of such shared meanings demands communication among those who share membership in the community: sets of people who fail to communicate cannot compose a common culture and cannot, therefore, constitute a community. Through ensuring that access to a two-way communication is open to all, local nets help to provide an infrastructure on which a sense of community can be built.

Etzioni (1993: 32) presents a model of a cohesive society, based on communitarian principles, which uses an analogy based on Chinese nesting boxes, in which

"less encompassing communities . . . are nestled within more encompassing ones . . . which in turn are situated within still more encompassing communities."

Community networks can be seen as embodying many of the tensions between the local and the global that have accompanied the development of modern society. There is an apparent paradox in the attempt by local nets to use placeless on-line systems, giving access to the world-wide Internet, to help build a local community defined by geography. Schuler (1996) points out:

"While virtually all community network systems . . . offer access to at least some Internet services (e-mail at a minimum), the focus of a community network is on the local community".

Gurstein (2001: 281) sees local nets as a potent counter to the globalising tendencies of modern society and forecasts that

"it is likely to be in the zone of interaction between the virtual and the real in communities that the future nexus of power and the recreation of citizenship are likely to reside. Where physical communities are empowered by the global reach of the virtual and where the virtual is empowered by the physical force of the real is the point where the true resistance to the global and the globalising will develop and prevail"

Wellman and his colleagues have coined the neologism "glocalisation" to refer to the twin process involving the use of the Internet to enhance local interaction:

"The Internet both provides a ramp to the global information highway and strengthens local links within neighbourhoods and households. For all its

global access, the Internet reinforces stay-at-homes. 'Glocalisation' occurs, both because the Internet makes it easy to contact many neighbours, and because fixed, wired Internet connections root users at their home and office desks." (Wellman, 2001: 27)

Evidence produced by Hampton and Wellman (2000) in a study of a leading-edge wired suburb in Canada and by Ferlander and Timms in a study of a marginalised community in Sweden (2001 and in progress) indicate that those who are most active online are also most active in the local community. In the Canadian study the middle class residents connected with each other and the wider world from home; in the Swedish study, following the demise of a subsidised local net sponsored by the housing association, residents used an Internet Café to similar ends. In large measure the Internet can be seen as providing a base for the development of new forms of community journalism. Where the users and producers of such material come together physically as well as virtually, as for instance in the Internet Café studied in Stockholm, the potential for the creation of a strong sense of community identity is greatly strengthened. Those who take part in the local network express higher levels of satisfaction with the community and rate the area as having more social capital than those who are isolated.

Towards a Non-local future?

There is now a considerable volume of research supporting the conclusion that the use of the Internet by local communities is an effective means of enhancing community identity. There remain many questions concerning the future impact of developments in computer mediated communication. To date much use of the Internet for interpersonal interaction remains text-based and tied to a physical address, the house or office in which access is available. With the development of high bandwidth wireless forms of communication – the third generation of mobile telephony -

“computer-supported communication will be everywhere, but because it is independent of place, it will be nowhere...the person – not the place, household or workgroup – will become even more of an autonomous communication node” (Wellman, 2001: 19).

As new technologies mean that we move from place-to-place forms of communication to person-to-person contact the answer to the question “Where are you from?” may become an email address. The success or otherwise of the third generation of wireless communications may turn out to have far more than simply economic consequences for Telecoms companies and their long-suffering shareholders.

APPENDIX

An IT-Café – a poem by Åsa Freij

Ett IT-café
Är en bra idé
Som blev gjord
Till ord
Och till handling
Varpå förvandling
Skedde på en enslig ort
Som smort
Gick sedan
Integrering
Och redan
Känner många varann
Ångest försvann
Vissa till och med fann
Varandra
Och andra
lärd sig veta
dock vad grannarna heta
och även att samarbeta
och att sluta slåss
och så lite om själva datorn
förstås
Och om nätet
Och litet förmätet
Om världen därute
Som från Skarpnäck
Öppnats
För oss

Åsa Freij 11.3.02

An IT-Café
Is a good idea
That was made
Into words
And into action
After which change
Occurred in a lonely place
Like clockwork
Happened then
Integration
And already
Many knew one another
Agony disappeared
Some even found
Each other
And other
Learnt to know
The names of the neighbours
And even to co-operate
And to stop fighting
And also a bit about the computer
itself
Of course
And about the Net
And a bit presumptuous
About the world out there
Which from Skarpnäck
Has opened
For us

(translated by Sara Ferlander)

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