GLOBALIZATION

THE READER

Edited by

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and

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THE ATHLONE PRESS
LONDON

2000

15 RHEINGOLD AND THE ILLUSION OF 'COMMUNITY'

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Rheingold (1993) attempts to define how identity will be constructed via computer mediated communication (CMC):

> We reduce and encode our identities as words on a screen, decode and unpack the identities of others. The way we use these words, the stories (true and false) we tell about ourselves (or about the identity we want people to believe us to be) is what determines our identities in cyberspace. The aggregation of personae, interacting with each other, determines the nature of the collective culture. (p. 61)

One might suppose the same is true as to the aggregation of particular traits that determine the nature of the individual. However, the symbolic processes that Rheingold elides through use of such words as 'encode' and 'unpack' (themselves taken from the language of computer software) are fraught with unproblematized assumptions about the work that humans perform in search of their own identities and those of others. Interaction ought not be substituted for community, or, for that matter, for communication, and to accept uncritically connections between personae, individuals and community inadvisable. It will be unfortunate, too, if we uncritically accept that CMC will usher in the great new era that other media of communication have failed to bring us. It is not, as virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier says, that television has failed us because it 'wasn't planned well enough' (*Virtual Reality*, 1992, p. 6); it is that organization and planning are not necessarily appropriate processes for constructing or recapturing the sense of community for which we are nostalgic. Bender (1978) sharply criticizes those who seek 'to recapture community by imputing it to large-scale organizations and to locality-based social activity regardless of the quality of human relationships that characterize these contexts' (p. 143). Instead, Bender finds community in the midst of a transformation and asks us to heed his call that we not, by way of our nostalgia, limit definitions of community to that which 'seventeenth century New Englanders knew' (p. 146), although with electronic town hall meetings and the like we seem to be doing precisely that. One example can be found in Rheingold's work. Although often critical in much of his writing, it is clear from the comparisons that Rheingold (1993) makes to other forms of community that what he calls 'virtual communities' are predicated on nostalgic (and romantic) ideals:

> It's a bit like a neighborhood pub or coffee shop. It's a little like a salon, where I can participate in a hundred ongoing conversations with people who don't care what I look like or sound like, but who do care how I think and communicate. There are seminars and word fights in different corners. (p. 66)

> Virtual communities might be real communities, they might be pseudo communities, or they might be something entirely new in the realm of social contracts, but I believe they are in part a response to the hunger for community that has followed the disintegration of traditional communities around the world. (p. 62)

Of course, it is difficult to imagine what new online communities may be like, and it is far easier to use our memories and myths as we construct them. What is more important than simply understanding the construction we are undertaking is to notice that it is peculiar and particular to the computer. Because these machines are seen as 'linking' machines (they link information, data, communication, sound, and image through the common language of digital encoding), to borrow from Jensen (1990), they inherently affect the ways we think of linking up to each other, and thus they fit squarely into our concerns about community. Media technologies that have largely been tied to the 'transportation' view of communication mentioned earlier were developed to overcome space and time. The computer, in particular, is an 'efficiency' machine, purporting to ever increase its speed. But unlike those technologies, the computer used for communication is a technology to be understood from the 'ritual' view of communication, for once time and space have been overcome (or at least rendered surmountable) the spur for development is connection, linkage. Once we can surmount time and space and 'be' anywhere, we must choose a 'where' at which to be, and the computer's functionality lies in its power to make us organize our desires about the spaces we visit and stay in.

The question remains, though, whether or not the communities we may form by way of CMC will, or even ought to, be part of our public culture. If so, then perhaps it would be best to not understand them as communities. As Bender (1978) writes, 'Our public lives do not provide an experience of community. The mutuality and sentiment characteristic of community cannot and need not be achieved in public. We must be careful to distinguish between these two contexts of social experience' (p. 148).

The manner in which we seek to find community, empowerment, and political action all embedded in our ability to use CMC, is thereby troubling. No one medium, no one technology, has been able to provide those elements in combination, and often we have been unable to find them in any media. CMC has potential for a variety of consequences, some anticipated, some not. A critical awareness of the social transformations that have occurred and continue to occur with or without technology will be our best ally as we incorporate CMC into contemporary social life.

From: Understanding community in the information age, by S. G. Jones, in *Cybersociety: Computer Mediated Communication and Community*, edited by S. G. Jones, Sage, 1995.

16 VIRTUAL REALITY

S. G. Jones

Timothy Leary says we have been living in virtual reality since the proliferation of television sets. VR differs primarily from TV in that VR makes the experience interactive rather than passive (cited in Mondo, 1992, p. 262). Howard Rheingold (1991) asks us to:

> imagine a wrap-around television with three-dimensional programmes, including three-dimensional sounds and solid objects that you can pick up and manipulate, even feel with your fingers and hands. . . . Imagine that you are the creator as well as the consumer of your artificial experience, with the power to use a gesture or word to remold the world you see and hear and feel. (p. 16)

Brenda Laurel (1991) writes that, for her, VR brings the experience of acting, a way of exploring existence from the perspectives of varied characters, situations and worlds not otherwise encountered in our everyday lives. Laurel worked on Wild Palms, which was promoted as TV's first attempt at showing virtual reality; however, she does not think that even interactive television represents the future: 'It's a dead end' (quoted in McCarthy, 1993) with a lot of scary and hopeful possible successors to it 'depending on who owns the interactive media of the future' (Antonopulos and Barnett, 1992, p. 12). Unlike most of the programmers interested in virtual reality, she is working with electronic storytelling, 'a very female-dominated' activity, with the technology as an audience (Antonopulos and Barnett, 1992, p. 12). Laurel's approach is a good illustration of the importance of paying close attention to the interests of many rather than just to the statements of those who have the loudest and best financed statements about what computers can and should be programmed to do.

From: A backstage critique of virtual reality, by C. Kramarae, in *Cybersociety: Computer Mediated Communication and Community*, edited by S. G. Jones, Sage, 1995.