Building Virtual Communities

Learning and Change in Cyberspace

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Afterword

Building, Buying, or Being There: Imagining Online Community

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If one were to read *Building Virtual Communities* for its references alone it would be a valuable book. We have accumulated a considerable body of literature that examines and theorizes online community, and this book does a marvelous job of pushing forward and extending the conversation about their manifestation and maintenance.

But the tensions they manifest and maintain can still be heard as a murmur beneath that conversation. Do we "build" virtual communities, or do they occur on their own, "organically"? Are they "imagined" or "real"? Is online community a new form of encounter with others, or is it a variation on the theme of a (siren) song? We know the virtual cannot (at least, not yet) be *entirely* disassociated from the "real" (Jones, 1998). And our research into online social phenomena is routinely escaping that trap of dissociation. Less and less of it may be critiqued in ways that Wellman and Gulia (1999) critiqued earlier Internet research that

> Treats the Internet as an isolated social phenomenon without taking into account how interactions on the Net fit with other aspects of people's lives. The Net is only one of many ways in which the same people may interact. It is not a separate reality. (p. 334)

But as our study of the online and off-line worlds we create continues to grow, let us also increase our sensitivity to the ways that we are creating the articulations between online and off-line. It has been argued elsewhere (Jones & Kucker, 2000) that early research on Internetworking was targeted in such a fashion as to abstract users from the contexts within which they encountered and participated in online communities. Whether online community is built or organic, we "imagine communities" as we write our essays and research reports just as they are imagined when one codes software for threaded discussions, builds MOOs, and the

like. Just as we imagine communities, we imagine users and contexts of use (one may argue that we do both simultaneously).

I would like to propose, however, that our imagination, particularly when it is grounded (in the academic and colloquial sense) in scholarly idioms, is at least a little too rational. Much as comparative studies of online versus face-to-face communities tend to foreground rationality in the context of media choice (Wellman et al., 1996), so too the stories we tell about our perceptions and interpretations of online communities tend toward the explanatory, prescriptive, and sometimes exhortatory.

As Internet research, particularly in communication studies, has drifted toward forms of uses and gratifications research, it has increasingly reinforced the idea prevalent in early studies of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) that individuals will make a rational choice among available communication media based on consideration of how well each available medium matches the task (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Daft, Lengel & Trevino, 1987; Webster & Trevino, 1995). On the one hand, I believe that we are largely rational and do make thoughtful decisions about the ways we communicate; however, I am also of the opinion that we should create a new term, "e-rational choice," to designate the way choices are made online. Internet use is influenced by more than rational choices made in consideration of message content and the situation or task at hand; use is also influenced by social forces and symbolic cues, which may seem largely irrational, trivial, or lacking consideration (see Schmitz & Fulk, 1991). Think, for instance, of the symbolic value, the stylishness, if you will, of using a new gadget, compared to using a desktop phone or an old computer. Many times the choices that are made about use of a technology of communication have less to do with communication and more to do with fashion, status, or communication to those *present* (rather than to the one at a distance on account of whom the technology, one may believe, is engaged).

The same is likely true of community – the ones to which we belong are not only varied by type (e.g., geographical, electronic, interest) but also vary by choice. Those choices are often irrational, inscrutable, and irreducible to the narratives we write as we seek to understand and explain social behavior. What's more, the sociological study of community (particularly as it has been adopted for use by those studying online community) has closely hewed to western notions of community, likely because those are notions with which CMC scholars are most familiar. And it is in the western world that the Internet has seen its initial phase of development – though whether the west will continue to lead it in future is not certain.

The history of online community has not necessarily been one of rational, linear developments. Indeed, once we have had sufficient time to assay it, we will, I believe, find that an interesting tension was continually at the core of its growth. Its earliest manifestations vary from the accidental (PLATO) to the deliberate (the WELL). Its later manifestations can be placed almost anywhere on that spectrum. But its roots, nevertheless, are rather deep within the 1960s. In his account of the development of the WELL, the "Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link" (Rheingold, 1994), Rheingold sums up the intimate connection between online community and the countercultural rhetoric and beliefs of the 1960s. Rheingold writes,

> I was still toting around my 1969 edition of the *Whole Earth Catalog* when I read an article about a new computer service that Whole Earth publisher Stewart Brand and his gang were starting in the spring of 1985. (p. 38)

He goes on to note that "the WELL is rooted in the San Francisco Bay area and in two separate cultural revolutions that took place there," one being "the Haight-Ashbury counterculture" and the other being "the tip-rudder people who steer the movements and disciplines that steer society" (pp. 39–40). From hence, to paint in broad strokes, sprang *Wired*, the "digerati," and most of our notions of what online community "should" be like. The vision was Brand's, Rheingold says, and had three goals:

1. To facilitate communication among interesting people in the Bay area,
2. To provide sophisticated conferencing at a low price,
3. To bring email to the masses.

The model of a "salon" was frequently invoked (and still forms a part of the rhetoric of online community, not only thanks to Salon.com), but most interesting is a comment Rheingold attributes to Matthew McClure, the WELL's first director: "We needed a collection of shills who could draw the suckers into the tents" (p. 42).

I mention that not to criticize McClure, nor to impugn the motives of the WELL's founders, but rather to point out that it was at least fifteen years ago that one can find clear evidence of a problem that still plagues those who seek to create communities online: communities must have *members* who want to *remain* members. On-line or off-line, we are ourselves conflicted – as Carey points out, "Americans are for ever building a 'city on a hill' and then promptly planning to get out of town to avoid the authority and constraint of their creations" (2000, pp. 88–9). It is simplistic to say that his remark points out the obvious, that communities are dynamic, evolutionary things. The true insight he gives is that, in the United States at least, communities are very much constructed no matter how organic they may seem. In the same essay in which he makes this remark, he underscores the roots of Innis's work in the Chicago School of Sociology (1964). He mines an observation by Hovland, "that in the United States communication is a substitute for tradition. In the absence of a shared inherited culture, communication had to accomplish the tasks of social creation and integration that were elsewhere the more automatic by-products of tradition" (p. 87). When it comes to online community, the only thing close to an inherited culture is what little history there is of the WELL, PLATO, and other early gatherings of users. There is not tradition, at least not as we know it, and there will not be for some time to come (if ever), because online our histories do not intertwine as they do off-line.

The history that we have of online communities is thus greatly important, but it is hardly begun. Rheingold's book is a good step, as is Hafner's "The WELL: A Story of Love, Death and Real Life in the Seminal Online Community" (2001). Neither, though, makes enough of the connections the WELL had to the personal computer's development, to mainstream computing. One particularly notable connection in that regard is between the WELL, SRI International, and Valee, who in 1982 published a book titled *The Network Revolution* and explained the "Grapevine Alternative" to networking in the Digital Society. The WELL continues to exert a powerful grip on the rhetoric and imagination of those hoping to find community online and those seeking to create it.

Another important connection to be made is that the *Whole Earth Catalog*, intentionally or not, marked the beginning of more or less overt attempts *by the counterculture* to capitalize on the counterculture (as opposed to, say, mainstream culture's attempt to capitalize on it, best illustrated by CBS Records's advertising copy in a 1968 issue of *Rolling Stone* stating that "The Man can't bust our music" or its later "The revolutionaries are on CBS" slogan). Calhoun has termed this period as the beginning of the "apolitical counterculture" (1998, p. 377), and trenchantly noted that the term "virtual community" as applied by Rheingold in relation to the WELL is "an overstatement" (p. 383).

The apolitical counterculture's expansion along with the suspension of disbelief concerning the hyperbolic use of "community" in relation to online social relations has resulted in what we might term "commercial community." Its most clear manifestation can be found in the preface to one of the most influential books in e-commerce, Hagel and Armstrong's *Net Gain* (1997). It begins:

> Our interest in virtual communities has evolved over many years . . . it began in the late 1980s, when we observed the emergence and growth of The Well [sic]. The second impetus for this book came from our work with clients . . . [v]irtual communities provided a powerful context for [exploiting new market opportunities] and were therefore more than just an interesting social phenomenon. In fact, they were the kernel of a fundamentally new business model. (pp. ix – x)

Now, I have a hard time restraining myself (given my unease with their use of my own work) from firing back that the communities that matter to me most, and I think matter most to others, are *not* business models. What matters, however, is not simply that the twin engines of advertising and marketing research have found ready fuel for their demographic and psychographic explorations by appropriating concepts of community. What matters is that communities have a cost; in fact, any construction, real or symbolic, has a cost. To build a community, even a virtual one, has costs associated not just with machines and software but also with time, attention, inclusion, and exclusion. The mix of community and value is not only heady but also mutually dependent. It is when value is measured primarily in terms of capital that the mix becomes unstable. The communities that seem to thrive best are the ones that allow multiple values, set by members "between the lines" of the words that are expressed, and not the ones that quantify value.

This leads me to three points. First, scholars are still too focused on *ourselves* and insufficiently attentive to the ways in which others value and define community. Second, while looking for how community is "made," we overlook its ever-presence. And, third, while trying to find community, we fail to look for its disappearance.

Those engaged in using community models for e-commerce make a mistake similar to the one scholars perpetuate. In an October 13 *CNet* story headlined "Portals revamp sites for minorities," the reporter wrote:

> But the community model has hardly panned out for all comers, especially among the numerous portal sites that have sprung up to cater to ethnic American audiences. Rather than seamlessly exploiting a niche, these players are still tinkering with their formulas in a bid to find one that works.
>
> "You can't just give [consumers] a site and say, 'This is an Asian hub, come to me,"' said Forrester Research analyst Ekaterina Walsh. "After you take into account income, technology, age, and motivation of life, ethnic background doesn't matter." (Hu, 1999)

The story contains a subhead calling online ethnic communities "An obvious gold mine." The assumption is that people will find ties that bind, no matter what, no matter where. This assumption is patently ridiculous but shows us one of the consequences of the WELL's influence. I agree that there is no such thing as a "community of disinterest," but I would also like to point out that reliance on the notion of a "community of interest" as a means of theorizing about why people "gather" online is hardly sufficient. People as much enjoy spending time with others who are *unlike* them as with those who are like them. We do indeed find ties with most anyone, but whether they bind is another matter.

Scholars concerned with social aspects of the Internet and CMC have centralized "connection" in their research, arguing that human-connecting computer networks are by nature social networks (Jones, 1995; Wellman et al., 1996). They also emphasize context, both that surrounding and encompassed within these media. The former refers more to the physical environment and user demographics existing outside the enveloped media, and the latter attends to the notion of "social space," which is created and re-created in the course of technologically mediated interactions. What is unclear in both cases is whether connection matters, and, if it does, how it matters to those who are connecting. When does community "happen"?

Much can be learned about its formation from studies of disasters, natural and man-made. Having lived in Oklahoma for some years, I saw first-hand the ways in which communities could pull together after tornado and flood. I saw the ways an entire city and state bonded after the Oklahoma City bombing. I am sure we have all heard such stories about any number and kind of other disasters. But what happens to community when the crisis is over? Let me put that another way. While I have come across studies of community formation during and after crisis, I have yet to find much written about what happens to community after the homes are rebuilt, or after people move away, when, basically, the event that brought people together is long gone. What happens on a daily basis, what happens on the anniversaries, where does community "go" when it goes away, may it come back, and why? What are the obligations of scholars, should they do more than find what they are looking for, pack up, and leave?

Wellman's work on communities and social support can again give us insight, as can studies of community and disaster. It is particularly important to attend to studies of community attachment (Sampson, 1988; O'Brien, Hassinger & Dersham, 1994). Though this body of work is based on studies of offline communities, it has consistently shown that length of

residence in a community is directly correlated to strength of attachment to it, regardless of how one measures attachment (by way of interpersonal ties, participation, or trust).

It behooves us to continue work on community attachment in the realm of online social interaction. But we should also be cognizant of the ways that a medium may influence attachment, and so I have been working with colleagues to find ways to explore the addition of "medium" as a variable in community attachment measures.

It is important, too, to note that scholars become attached to communities. I believe we should ask about the degree and nature of scholarly engagement. Though there are compelling reasons to maintain critical distance, it is disingenuous to claim doing so as a reason for avoiding contact with a community, online or off. Much is made of "ethnography" as a means of discovering the nature and norms of particular social formations, but it is rare in the study of online community to find anything other than textual analysis. We should ask what the study of online community would look like if it proceeded from a critical ethnography. Nightingale's (1993) masterful critique of ethnographic audience research gives insight:

> The description of work as "ethnographic" describes its research techniques rather than its research strategy. The use of participant observation, observation, interviews, group interviews, personal documents are all included among the naturalistic techniques of ethnography. [Typically studies of online community] do not set out to provide an account of an "other" culture . . . in many of them the only contact with [an] "other culture" is an interview or the reading of a [text]. Indeed the senses in which [users] can be seen as an "other culture" are also tenuous. The relationship between researcher and researched is foregrounded as problematic once the term "ethnography" is used to describe it . . . the very use of the term acts as a reminder of the differences (of class, education, religion, gender, age etc.) between them, differences which are often unacknowledged. Transcripts of interview, accounts of interaction, are substituted for descriptive detail. What occurs, then, in the absence of rigorous ethnographic observation and description, when the techniques of ethnography are divorced from ethnographic process, is a co-opting of the interviewee's experience of the text by the researcher, and its use as authority for the researcher's point of view . . . and demonstrates no sensitivity to the power relations or to the cultural differences which operate when the data is obtained. (pp. 152–3)

Three things should be clear. One, we have not done enough ethnographic work in CMC research and in studies of online community. Two, we have little history of the social formations one may encounter online. Three, scholars bring with them perspectives on community. The essays collected in this volume set us on the path toward expanding our views and knowledge precisely in these three areas. They also illustrate the need to transcend the etic/emic dualism one initially encounters when pursuing ethnographic approaches to the study of online social behavior. Enough has been said and written about "The Matrix" (both the film and the concept from William Gibson), but it does bear repeating that we are woven into webs of meaning and organization. The first step toward transcendence, as shown throughout this book, is acknowledgment of our assumptions and critique of our own subjectivities as we study and write about community. To do less would be to foster the colonization of imagination and rhetoric, to engage unreflexively in basically colonial practice, and to participate in the corrupt valuation of invaluable social possibilities.

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