Virtual communities - exchanging ideas through computer bulletin boards

By Howard Rheingold, UC Berkeley, Stanford

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Introductory remarks by Howard Rheingold, April 2008.

This article is the first known publication of the term "virtual community." I'm fairly certain about this because a Princeton librarian had the task of ascertaining the first use of the term, and this article is the earliest he could find.

I used to write a lot for the Well community online -- for free. KevinKelly was editor of the Whole Earth Review and one of the founders and designers of the Well. He tried to get me to write for Whole Earth Review, but I was trying to make my living as a writer, and I couldn't afford to trade an article's worth of my time for $250. I lived near the WER/Well offices. Once in a while, Kevin would stop by my house. Not for the first time, he provoked an argument about whether or not you could call what we were doing on the Well a "community." After I ranted at him, he said "Write down what you just said, and I'll pay you $250." Which I did. $250/hr is good. Over the years, an entire discipline of critical cyberculture studies has grown up, and ever cyberculture critic, as part of the initiation ceremony, has to take a whack at something I wrote in this article. I've changed my mind about some things, which seems entirely natural to me, given the time that has passed and the experiences that I've lived through since then. Minds change, times change, people change.

I remember what provoked the rant. It was the idea that most people would say, back in 1987, that only a subculture of probably pathologically antisocial computer geeks would spend their time communicating through computer networks. What else but "community" to apply to the friendships, support groups, marriages made and broken, births and deaths, parties and rituals that were happening among the people I knew online -- a group that included, yes, pathologically antisocial computer geeks, but also schoolteachers, newspaper columnists, Baptist ministers, activists, futurists, artists proto-environmentalists, radio producers?

Let's just say that the world of online sociality has become more complicated, empirical data is no longer non-existent, and the picture of what it all means has become more nuanced.

BECAUSE I am a writer, I used to spend my days alone in my room with typewriter my words, and my thoughts. On occasion, I ventured outside to interview people or to find information. After work, I would reenter the human community, via my neighborhood, my lamity. My circle of personal and professional acquaintances, But I was isolated and lonely during the working day, and my work did not provide any opportunity to expand my circle of friends and colleagues.

For the past two years, however, I have participated in a wide-ranging, intellectually stimulating, professionally rewarding, and often intensely emotional exchange with dozens of new friends and hundreds of colleagues. And I still spend my days in a room, physically isolated.

My mind, however, is linked with a worldwide collection of like-minded (and not-solike-minded) souls: my virtual community. If you get a computer and a modem, you can join us.

A virtual community is a group of people Who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks. Like any other community, it is also a collection of people who adhere to a certain (loose) social contract, and who share certain (eclectic) interests .It usually has a geographically local focus, and often has a connection to a much wider domain. The local focus of my virtual community, The Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (aka "The WELL') is the San Francisco Bay Area; the Wider locus consists of tens of thousands of other sites around the world, and hundreds of thousands of other Communitarians, linked via exchanges of messages into a meta-Community known as the Usenet.

The existence of computer-linked communities was predicted twenty years ago by J-C. R. Licklider, who set in motion the research that resulted in the creation of the first such Community, the ARPAnet:

"What will on-line interactive communities be like?" Licklider wrote, in 1968: "In most fields they will consist of geographically separated Members, sometimes mes grouped in small clusters and sometimes Working individually, They will be Communities not of common location, but of Common interest . . . " My friends and I are part of the future that Licklider dreamed about, and we can attest to the truth of his prediction that "life will be happier for the on-line individual because the people With whom one intracts most strongly will be Selected more by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity."

I work with a computer now, instead of a typewrite, so it is easy for me to drop into my electronic watering hole without leaving my chain MY community is both a sacred place, in the sense that I visit it for the sheer pleasure of communicating with my newfound friends, and a practical instrument in the sense that I use it to scan and gather information on subjects that are of momentary or enduring importance, from childcare to neuroscience, technical questions on telecommunications to arguments on philosophical, political, or spiritual subjects, It's a bit like a neighborhood pub or coffee shop: I don't have to move from my desk, there's a certain sense of place to it. 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. And it's a little like a group mind, where questions are answered, support is given, inspiration is provided, by people I may have never heard from before, and whom I may never meet face to face.

Virtual communities have several advantages over the old-fashioned communities of place and profession. Because we cannot see one another, we are unable to form prejudices about others before we read what they have to say: Race, gender, age, national origin and physical appearance are not apparent unless a person wants to make such characteristics public. People whose physical handicaps make it difficult to form new friendships find that virtual communities treat them as they always wanted to be treated - as transmitters of ideas and feeling beings, not carnal vessels with a certain appearance and way of walking and talking (or not walking and not talking). Don't mistake filtration of appearances for dehumanization: words on a screen are quite capable of moving one to laughter or tears, of evoking anger or compassion, of creating a community from a collection of strangers.

In traditional kinds of communities, we are accustomed to meeting people, then getting to know them. In virtual communities, you can get to know people and then choose to meet them. In some cases, you can get to know people whom you might never meet on the physical plane. In the traditional community, we search through our pool of neighbors and professional colleagues, of acquaintances and acquaintances of acquaintances, in order to find people who share our values and interests. We then exchange information about one another, share and debate our mutual interests, and sometimes we become friends. In a virtual community we can go directly to the place where our particular interests are being discussed, then get acquainted with those who share our passions. In this sense, the topic is the address: You can't simply pick up a phone and ask to be connected with someone who wants to talk about Islamic art or California wine, or someone with a three-year-old daughter or a 30-year-old Hudson; you can, however, join a computer conference on any of those topics, then open a public or private correspondence with the previously unknown people you find in that conference. You win find that your chances of making friends are magnified by orders of magnitude over the old methods of finding a peer group.

Virtual communities can help their members cope with information overload. The problem with the information age, especially for students and knowledge workers who spend their time immersed in the info-flow, is that there is too much information available and no effective filters for sifting the key data that are useful and interesting to us as individuals. Dreamers in the Artfficial Intelligence research community are trying to evolve "software agents" that can seek and sift, filter and find, and save us from the awful feeling one gets when it turns out that the specific knowledge one needs is buried in 15,000 pages of related information. In my virtual community, we don't have software agents (because they don't exist yet), but we do have informal social contracts that allow us to act as software agents for one another. If, in my wanderings through information space, l come across items that don't interest me but which I know one of my group of online friends appreciate, I send the appropriate friend a pointer to the key datum or discussion.

This social contract requires one to give something, and enables one to receive something. I have to keep my friends in mind and send them pointers instead of throwing my informational discards into the virtual scrap-heap. It doesn't take a great deal of energy to do that, since I have to sift that information anyway in order to find the knowledge I seek for my own purposes. And with twenty other people who have an eye out for my interests while they explore sectors of the information space that I normally wouldn't frequent, I find that the help I receive far outweighs the energy I expend helping others: A perfect fit of altruism and selfinterest. For example, I was invited to join a panel of experts who advise the U.S. Congress Office of Technology Assessment. The subject of the assessment is "Communication Systems for an Information Age." Before I went to Washington for my first panel meeting, I opened a conference in The WELL and invited assorted information-freaks, technophiles, and communication experts to help me come up with something to say.

By the time I sat down with the captains of industry, government advisers, and academic experts at the panel table, I had over 200 pages of expert advice from my own panel. I wouldn't have been able to garner that much knowledge of my subject in an entire academic or industrial career, and it took me (and my virtual community) six weeks. The same strategy can be applied to an infinite domain of problem areas, from literary criticism to software evaluation.

Virtual communities have several drawbacks in comparison to faceto-face communication, and these disadvantages must be kept in mind if you are to make use of the advantages of these computermediated discussions. The filtration factor that prevents one from knowing the race or age of a participant also prevents people from communicating the facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice that constitute the "invisible" but vital component of most faceto-face communications. Irony, sarcasm, compassion, and other subtle but all-important nuances that aren't conveyed in words alone are lost when all you can see of a person is a set of words on a screen. This lack-of-communication bandwidth can lead to misunderstandings, and is one of the reasons that "flames" or heated diatribes that normally wouldn't crop up often in normal discourse seem to appear with relative frequency in computer conferences.

Other disadvantages stem from the asynchronous and one-to-many nature of online communications. When you talk to somebody on the phone, you know your audience is getting your message right then and there. Electronic mail eliminates telephone tag, but adds a degree of uncertainty When you send someone electronic mad you are never sure when your intended audience will get your message, and when you post a response in a computer conference, you are never sure who is going to get the message. Another advantage that can turn into a disadvantage is the unpredictability of responses: if is refreshing and fun to find all the unexpected angles and digressions people can come up with in response to a question or statement; it is frustrating when the specific you seek is lost in "item drift."

The way to build a virtual community, and to use it effectively, is to spend time to make time. At the beginning there are unknown commands to learn, and new procedures and customs to absorb.

This is the steep part of the learning curve, and many people simply give up, because computer conferencing is not as simple as picking up a telephone or addressing a letter. It can be much more rewarding, however, and there are always people willing to help, which leads to the key advice for building and using a virtual community: don't be afraid to ask questions, and don't hesitate to answer questions. Once you learn your way around, don't be afraid to pose new topics of discussion: plant informational seeds and watch discussions grow around them, and study the ways knowledge emerges from discourse. Use pointers to data or discussions that might interest others - send them and ask for them. Use all the communication tools available to your community: private electronic mail for one-to-one communications and for making arrangements to meet people face-to-face, public computer conferences for one-to-many questions and discussions, planfiles and biographies (your own and others) can help you and your community discover what kind of person you are and where your interests lie; and don't forget that telephones and face to face meetings are still appropriate ways to cement and extend the friendships you make online.