

Bowling Alone, But Online Together?
Virtual Communities and American Public Life

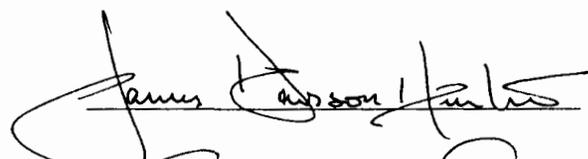
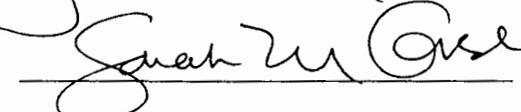
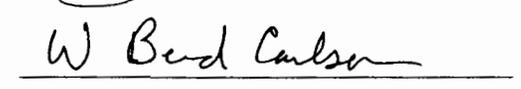
Felicia Wu Song
Charlottesville, Virginia

B.A., Yale University, 1994
M.A., Northwestern University, 1996

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Department of Sociology

University of Virginia
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Felicia Wu Song

James Davison Hunter, Chair
Department of Sociology
University of Virginia

ABSTRACT

The integration of new communication technologies into the fabric of everyday life has raised important questions about their effects on existing conceptions and practices of community, relationship, and personal identity. How do these technologies mediate and reframe our experience of social interactions and solidarity? What are the cultural and social implications of the structural changes that they introduce? This dissertation critically considers these questions by examining the social and technological phenomenon of online communities and their role in the ongoing debates about the fate of American civil society.

In light of growing concerns over declining levels of trust and civic participation expressed by scholars such as Robert Putnam, many point to online communities as possible catalysts for revitalizing communal life and American civic culture. To many, online communities appear to render obsolete not only the barriers of space and time, but also problems of exclusivity and prejudice. Yet others remain skeptical of the Internet's capacity to produce the types of communities necessary for building social capital. After reviewing and critiquing the dominant perspectives on evaluating the democratic efficacy of online communities, this dissertation suggests an alternative approach that draws from the conceptual distinctions made by Mark E. Warren's political theory of associations.

A content analysis of thirty online communities was conducted to determine their dominant structural and institutional features. The findings show that online communities tend to have high ease of exit, are socially constituted and oriented towards exclusive group identity goods. Producing a relatively narrow range of democratic effects, they are conducive to fostering inner-group trust, personal efficacy, and the public representation of difference. They are poor sources of mutual obligation, reciprocity, deliberative skills, and trust and cooperation with those outside the group. Moreover, in taking into consideration the market's institutional role in the development and management of online groups, they appear to illustrate and epitomize the commodification of community and the fate of public life in a consumer culture. Under such institutional conditions, it is difficult to see how online communities can substantively help revitalize American civil society.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

How [do] free, critically-thinking individuals...sustain a public-spirited community of citizens....Our only choice is not one between an aggregate of individuals without common public concern and a pre-modern community organized around a single substantive idea of the common good. Envisaging the modern democratic political community outside of this dichotomy is the crucial challenge...

-Chantal Mouffe

“The virtual community.” Much like the popular notion of the global village, the term suggests an apparent oxymoron, a paradox. How can a “community,” traditionally understood to be locally-based and embodied, be “virtual”? To what extent is a strong sense of belonging, stable membership, common vision and even interpersonal intimacy possible through the Internet—a tool that technologically connects computers servers (not people) to each other? Despite these common questions and doubts, the apparent paradox of the “virtual community” is in fact the very source of its appeal.

For in these computer-mediated groups on the Internet, individuals have the benefit of sharing their deepest secrets, and yet never risk their personal privacy. Virtual communities can deliver a strong sense of belonging without the burden of distasteful coercion or parochialism. Members can connect with their community at any time, while managing when the community or other members enters their own life according to their convenience. Job mobility and other life changes that normally alter an individual’s capacity to stay connected to a local community have little or no effect in a virtual community. Virtual communities promise to free people from the limitations of their local neighborhood or workplace, allowing them to seek and find affinity groups from all around the world as easily as discovering those in their local neighborhood. Individuals who have been

marginalized for their race, gender, class, or physical condition, not only can easily find others who share the experience of bearing a stigmatized identity, but also socialize without ever having their physical features or status hinder their interactions. Instead, there is the sense that people's "true selves" might finally be revealed and sustained free of their physical limitations. Last, but perhaps greatest of all, if a group's dynamics change for the worst, or if an individual's own life demands a change in involvement or commitment, leaving and finding another group can be easily done with little or no consequence.

The apparent paradox of the "virtual community" then is not, for most, a cause for concern, but rather a source of hope. For, as political theorist William Galston suggests, "if we are linked to others by choice rather than accident, if our interaction with them is shaped by mutual adjustment rather than hierarchical authority, and if we can set aside these bonds whenever they clash with our individual interests, then the lamb of connection can lie down with the lion of autonomy" (1999, p.8). This, at least, is the hope of virtual communities.

Even from its infancy, the Internet has promised to transform not only the economic realities of commerce and globalization in the current information society, but also the social and institutional realities of the American political landscape. Though the Internet has been infused with sufficient amounts of excitement and enthusiasm, several important questions remain: How do new communication technologies mediate and reframe our everyday experience of social interactions? What are the cultural and social implications of structural changes that such technologies might bring to social interaction? What quality of autonomy and connection is cultivated so that what appears to be in contradiction in the "virtual community," can actually co-exist? To critically consider the cultural and social effects of new communication technologies, this dissertation examines as a case study the

phenomenon of virtual communities within the context of the ongoing speculation over their potential role in strengthening American democracy.

THE INTERNET: A NEW HOPE FOR DEMOCRACY

As the Internet and virtual communities have risen to prominence in the economic sector and the public imagination, the possibility that these communities might allow “the lamb of connection [to] lie down with the lion of autonomy” comes as an exciting and timely prospect. For, in the last decade or so, the very future of contemporary American political culture has been in question and many consider online communities to hold great potential for addressing the needs of modern individuals in an increasingly rationalized and atomized society.

Growing evidence of apathy and cynicism about politics among the American electorate has generated much concern among scholars about the health of American democracy (Dionne 1991; Eliasoph 1998; Elshtain 1995; Isaac 1998; Lasch 1995; Sandel 1996). A collective sense that a viable public sphere is lost and that the excesses of individualism are reinforced in ever more institutions, all contribute to a growing fear that the fundamental assumptions and everyday practices necessary for sustaining a vital democracy are rapidly disappearing. The facade of political stability appears to barely shroud not only a widespread indifference or deep sense of resignation about the seemingly incommensurable differences that grip our country, but also more fundamentally, a basic inability to think in terms of the collective (Sennett 1977; Seligman 1996). Whatever hope was gained from the triumph of democracy in Eastern Europe during the late eighties and early nineties were dampened by numerous published accounts of “Democracy and its

Discontents” and “Democracy’s Dark Times” (Sandel 1996; Isaac 1998; Keane 1988). These concerns about the sustainability of democracy have taken particular shape in a renewed interest in civil society and its capacity to cultivate a stable and vibrant democracy given the particularities of our present moment (Putnam 2000; Bellah 1985; Dionne 1998; Fukuyama 1995; Gellner 1994; Seligman 1996; Tocqueville 1998).

Neglected in political theory for quite a while, the eighteenth-century concept of civil society has regained considerable attention today. Traditionally conceived as the public domain that mediates between the private familial sphere and the state, civil society has also functioned as a space of uncoerced association or set of voluntary relational networks formed around faith, interest or ideology (Walzer 1995). In the recent American context, however, Nancy Rosenblum (1996) argues that, for the most part, these two aspects of civil society have been eclipsed by the prevailing moral agenda that the concept of civil society has been increasingly summoned to evoke. The normative project that civil society has come to represent focuses on the attempt to reconcile individual private interest with the public social good. In Adam Seligman’s *The Idea of Civil Society* (1996), he discusses how this understanding of civil society as an “ethical ideal, a vision of the social order that is not only descriptive, but prescriptive, providing us with a vision of the good life” can be traced back to its historical roots as well (p. 201).

Since the Enlightenment distinguished the individual as an agent independent of and apart from the community, the tension between protecting individual rights and cultivating the common good has occupied much of the work of contemporary political philosophy. The tensions between the individual and the collective, autonomy and solidarity has ultimately boiled down to the question that Durkheim asked: what type of social

organization best maintains an individual's freedom, while generating a compelling moral order that will give people meaning to their everyday life and provide a basis by which citizens can live together? (Nisbet 1953; Brint 2001) Recalling the Durkheimian notion of "the duality of human existence," where individuals are constituted by both interest-motivated action and altruistic-idealistic sources for social action, civil society has been historically conceived as the moral space of human interaction that resolved the tensions between the individual and social, the private and public. The project of civil society is, in this sense, the attempt to embody the "proper mode of constituting society itself" (Seligman, p. 2).

Within this ethical ideal, the associations and social networks of civil society are generally understood to function as schools of moral virtues, political competencies, and civic habits. The common belief is that they will cultivate the norms of cooperation, coordination, and social trust that are among the range of moral dispositions presumably undergirding political order and required for organizing collective action. As Jean Bethke Elshtain wrote in *Democracy on Trial* (1995),

While democracy requires laws, constitutions, and authoritative institutions, it also depends on democratic dispositions, including a preparedness to work with others different from myself towards shared ends; a combination of strong convictions with a readiness to compromise in the recognition that one can't always get everything one wants; and a sense of individuality and a commitment to civic goods that are not the possession of one person or of one small group alone (p. 2).

Similarly, Alexis de Tocqueville regarded civil society as the fertile ground for cultivating "self-interest rightly understood" and saw associations as "partial publics" where "individualism is chastened...the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men upon one another" (Rosenblum, p. 43). This view correlated with Hegel's belief that associations provide "the discipline of culture" while simultaneously

“holding out the ‘right to satisfaction,’ loosening hereditary and ascriptive affiliations so that individuals are able to see themselves at liberty to seek self-realization” (p. 29). The hope that civil society would both serve socially integrative functions as well as guarantee personal liberty is of particular importance to contemporary American political culture as its democratic institutions struggle under the threats of increased atomized individualism and apathy, and increased social fragmentation and political polarization.

BOWLING ALONE...BUT ONLINE TOGETHER?

In the last few decades, a widespread realization that the very health of American associational and communal life is at risk has heightened the sense that voluntary associations are a key part of both personal moral and public cultural development. One of the concerned voices that resonated beyond academic circles was political scientist Robert Putnam's. Considering the cultivation of robust voluntary associations to be the key to sustaining democracy, he argued in his “bowling alone” thesis that social capital has declined as participation in civic and social associations have eroded. When networks of civic engagement and informal sociability weaken, the habits of mutual obligation and reciprocity necessary for a robust civic culture suffer as well. As a result, the weakening of local communities and associations has meant more than merely a loss of meaningful interpersonal relations on the individual level, but also a loss of productive social relations on the communal and political level. Putnam's findings about declining levels of social and governmental trust seem to further point to an overall erosion of key social realities necessary for a viable democracy.

In 1995, when Putnam's "bowling alone" thesis was first published, the claim that Americans were no longer as civically active as prior generations rang true to many ears. When his book was published in 2000, despite having struck a chord with the anxieties that many Americans felt about the decline of local associational and communal life—Putnam's conclusions in his book *Bowling Alone* often were considered premature. Critics argued that Putnam interpreted a general state of civic decline when Americans may have simply turned away from conventional forms of associational involvement and chosen different means of fostering social ties and banding together for common causes (Pew Internet and American Life Project 2001; Fukuyama 2000; Starr 2000; Wills 2000; Talbot 2000). Several critics suggested that Putnam's thesis was borne out of a nostalgia for the golden age of traditional associations, and was thus blind to potentially new and vibrant spheres of public life—the most popular example being the growth in online community participation found on the Internet. Could the Internet—a technology that many have called an "inherently social technology"—be the key to helping individuals reconnect with their neighbors and civic organizations? Critics of Putnam repeatedly referred to the millions of Americans logging onto online communities and message boards to meet people, debate social issues, sustain pre-existing relational ties or participate in activist movements. Virtual community enthusiasts point to the increased numbers of social ties that the Internet has sustained, or the new possibilities of heterogeneity, egalitarianism and inclusivity that computer-mediated interaction might foster.

With a major 2001 Pew Internet and American Life study of online communities reporting that 84% of Internet users have visited an online group, Putnam's grim account of the contemporary civic terrain increasingly appeared to need reconsideration. The study

found that approximately 23 million Americans actively posted to their principal online group several times a week, and that half of these participants said that the Internet has helped them connect with groups or people who have their interests, and also meet diverse groups of people that they otherwise would not have met. Over one-quarter say that the Internet has helped them connect with people from different racial, ethnic, or economic backgrounds, and over one-third report that the Internet has helped them connect with people of different ages and generations. Very active online community members tended to report that the Internet has helped them find others who share their interest and to become more involved in groups and organizations that they belonged to already (58-61%). The Pew study concluded by arguing that the Internet may be most useful as a tool for pre-existing local groups.

With its extraordinarily high rate of diffusion, adoption and deployment, the new digital technology of the Internet has been embedded within institutions as wide-ranging as business, government, education, church, and private homes. Because of its capacity to free individuals of spatial and temporal limitations with unprecedented ease, convenience, and privacy, many hope that the Internet may alter our understanding and experience of community and social solidarity. While online groups have progressively increased in number and participation, they still do not represent the mainstream of Internet use. Reports from the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2000) found that, compared to the 93% of Internet-using Americans who have emailed, 36% have visited an online support group and 26% have participated in a chat room. On any given day, while 49% of Americans online use email, only 4% participate in chat rooms or discussion groups, and only 3% visit an online support group (Norris 1999). These statistics may suggest that it is still somewhat early for

predicting the future significance of online communities. However, it is still safe to say that the online community movement is significant for the following reasons: first, even from its early popularity in 1998, the number of those participating in online groups was already comparable to the numbers of those who use other forms of mainstream media that are commonly attributed worth and significance, such as talk radio, cable news programs, and National Public Radio. In 1998, a Pew survey found that 20% of regular Internet users were participating in discussion lists and chat groups at least once a week. While this percentage was still considerably lower than the 68% who regularly read the daily newspaper or the 64% who watched the local evening television news, there were already more people online in these groups than the 15% who regularly read news magazines such as *Time*, *U.S. News*, and *Newsweek*. (Norris 1999, p. 76)

Second, even if online communities do not become common sources of solidarity within the general public, they may still play very distinct roles in aiding activists in social movements or providing a public space in which opinions can be voiced and formed. They especially may have particular roles in supporting the public's rapid response to major events in the world. In the aftermath of September 11th and the Gore-Bush elections, Internet discussion groups experienced heavy traffic as people quickly connected and discussed with others around the world the unfolding events.

Quite aware of these developments, Putnam did acknowledge the potential role of online communities in a chapter devoted to possible countertrends of declining social capital. Putnam wrote: "Social capital is about networks, and the Net is the network to end all networks" (p. 171), but he remained skeptical, viewing the Internet mainly as a potentially powerful tool for existing collectivities, rather than generating new contexts of social capital.

While he holds out hope for what the Internet can be used to do, he still felt that the overall impact of the Internet would not outweigh the more widespread decline in civic engagement. Like most skeptics, Putnam doubted that the Internet would produce the types of social ties and communities necessary for a healthy democracy and flourishing social life. Championing a traditional form of face-to-face community, he remained apprehensive about the social ramifications of anonymity, lack of physical presence and absence of geographic space characteristic of online culture and interactions. Putnam's voice is one among many technologists, futurists and scholars attempting to stake sufficient ground in the growing debates over the nature of virtual communities.

THE MORAL DRAMA OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

The study and analysis of virtual communities within the context of the debates over the health of contemporary American civic engagement is made difficult for a number of reasons; though, what make the problems of the debate so vexing are the very things that make it a matter that is wonderfully rich and potentially illuminating. This singular issue of whether online communities have the potential to enhance or detract from American public life not only exists amidst profoundly deep cultural beliefs about media and technology in American society, but also gathers to itself the many highly contested interpretations and uses of the words "community" and "democracy."

On the surface, the rise of virtual communities does not appear to be a phenomenon even worth scholarly attention. Popularly regarded as the stuff of mere cyber-cultural or pop-cultural speculation, virtual communities have been merely one facet of the enthralling world of cyberspace, a corollary virtual space that fantastically offers an existence ostensibly

unfettered by the flawed social realities that we endure day by day. Free of physical matter, we are told that this cyberworld cuts us loose, setting us free to exist unmoored from all that constrains us. Technologists and futurists spin out sci-fi quality visions of embodied physical beings being replaced by avatars or cyborgs, bricks-and-mortar neighborhoods losing ground to virtual communities, our flesh-and-blood experience of material reality transcended by the sensory artifice of virtual reality. For some, the trends in virtual communities are merely fads linked to these dreams and can hardly be taken seriously. For others, the Internet and computer technology have become the defining force of the rest of human history. While the pioneers and explorers are swept away by the grand visions of "digitopia" (which are strikingly reminiscent of the technological sublime inspired by previous technologies such as the telegraph, electricity, and the radio), the Luddites and the nostalgics are desperately trying to awaken people to the destructive and harmful potential of these technological changes.

Underlying these surface reactions, a weak conceptual understanding of technology often prevails on both sides. Popular technological rhetoric is inflated in its claims, more accurately representing America's continued faith in Progress and belief in technological determinism than the capacities and effects of the technology itself. The tendency in people's opinions about the Internet is often to assume relatively simplistic processes of technological change: technology enters our static world and unilaterally effects change upon it. Such change is usually depicted as wholly good or wholly bad. All too often, these conceptions of technology blind observers from the deeper cultural, social and political consequences of new technologies that are at stake. Scholars of technology, however, have always shown that technological change is far more complex than commonly perceived and seek to temper judgments about technology by framing their consequences in terms of trade-offs between

what is gained and what is lost. Fortunately, much of the scholarly work being done on the Internet and virtual communities is disabusing us of assumptions that the Internet introduces a separate alternative reality. Many sociologists and communication scholars argue that the Internet is becoming increasingly integrated into our everyday life (Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2003; Kendall 2002; Jones 1997; Chayko 2002). Neither a portal into a chimerical postmodern existence nor a free fall into the "wild west" anarchy of the "electronic frontier," the Internet is found to be increasingly domesticated, exhibiting more and more signs of the social and cultural realities from which it was conceived.

Even as the influence of technological hype and rhetoric begins to wear off with time, the study of virtual communities still bears lingering problems, particularly in the realm of political speculation. While most agree that there is still much uncertainty and continued evolution of what the Internet will become, many observers of online communities have been quick to judge whether the Internet has a beneficial or ill effect on democracy. In doing so, the Internet and its virtual communities have become "setting[s] for moral dramas, in which we act out our understandings of who we are and how we ought to live" (Madsen et al. 2002, p. xiii). As settings of "moral dramas," virtual communities often become a lightning rod for debates over the meaning and significance of such intensely charged terms as "community" and "democracy."

Whether virtual communities are regarded as the solution or the cause of social and cultural problems often depends on one's understanding of the term "community." Depending on whether one views the state of community and social solidarity to be in decline or to be improving, each perspective implicitly carries particular views about what "communities" are constituted by and thus, what role technology plays in their formation,

maintenance or demise. The assessments of online groups are then largely based on normative claims that are frequently left undiscussed or unproblematized, all to the detriment of taking into consideration the more subtle dimensions of the technological and institutional realities of online communities. This problem is especially difficult in the context of debating the future of American civil society, for discussions about the anonymity, choice, or lack of physical presence characteristic of online communities often end up arriving at conclusions that merely reflect the entrenched differences between liberals and communitarians about the true nature of "community."

Similarly, much confusion surrounds blanket statements that are made about the Internet being a "democratic technology." First, on the most basic level, Internet enthusiasts and skeptics alike have both used the term "democracy" to mean very different things. Discussions about the political applications of the Internet range widely from its use for disseminating information to the citizenry, to its capacity to encourage involvement in political campaigns, to the promise of direct access to public leaders and organizations, to innovative subversive forms of cyberactivism. In the presidential election of 2000, much attention was paid to the new role that the Internet played in campaign fundraising and vote-swapping between Nader and Gore supporters. Even as the 2004 campaign for the democratic presidential nominee took place, Howard Dean was extolled for his successful use of "MeetUps"—Internet-initiated gatherings on state and regional levels—for organizing supporters and fundraising. Such applications do not even include the prospects of elections where voters can cast their ballots from their personal or office computers, a vision that has animated the political imagination from the Internet's beginning (Corrado 1996).

In the varied claims about the Internet and democracy, “democracy” refers to not only many facets—from governance, political activism, representation, public deliberation, to civic participation—but also different normative visions of democracy. In fact, political theorist Benjamin Barber (2003) points out that various traditions of democracy are conducive to contrasting attitudes about science and technology in general. While those advocating a liberal open society tend to closely associate the spirit of science to the success of liberal democracy, theorists of classical participatory democracy tend to view science and technology as a threat to intimacy and equality in political relations. The Internet’s speed in transmitting information and the potential of electronic voting from one’s home will be perceived to be efficient and convenient for supporters of representative and plebiscitary democracies. However, advocates of deliberative, participatory, or “strong” democracies (in Barber’s terms), view these characteristics as serving to further discourage citizens from gathering in public spaces for serious discussion and debate. These are some ways in which analyses of online communities are confused and unhelpful because of the tendency to conflate *descriptive* with *prescriptive* accounts. The simple question that Barber poses in an essay title: “*Which Democracy and Which Technology?*” (2003) needs to be addressed. However, with a lack of clarity about which democracy and what particular function of a technology is being celebrated or critiqued, it is all too often that generalized inquiries into whether technology will be a threat or salvation to democracy become platforms for advocating particular normative visions of democracy.

My hope is to present an analysis of online communities that is not distracted and confused by the historical or ideological baggage from the debates between communitarians and liberals, but one that clarifies the phenomenon of online communities and participation.

I offer a mid-level analysis of online communities which accounts for variation among community types and provides a picture of the structural features of online groups, before assessing their democratic efficacy. This project is not a social psychological account of the unique interaction found in computer-mediated environments, nor does it attempt to gauge the effect that online participation has on an individual's degree of offline civic engagement or voluntarism. Rather, this dissertation offers an institutional analysis of online communities that examines their structural features—both internally, with regards to the unique components and characteristics of online groups, and externally, in relation to the social and commercial realities of the Internet. Framed by the ongoing debates about the challenge that online communities seem to pose to Putnam's "bowling alone" thesis, this study will not attempt to establish an argument about what the nature of civil society and democracy ought to be, but rather focus on identifying precisely the *types of goods* that online communities have to offer to American political culture. Instead of assessing whether online communities produce sufficient amounts of trust or egalitarianism, this study examines the quality and conditions of those goods. The empirical focus of this dissertation is not so much on how "democratic" a virtual community is, but seeks to understand first and foremost the *culture* that exists in these groups.

STUDYING THE CULTURE OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Studied from a variety of perspectives, the existing literature on virtual communities is disparate in its methods and conclusions about their democratic efficacy. In this dissertation, I attempt to offer a systematic framework for analyzing online groups built on political theorist Mark E. Warren's theory of associations. His analytical distinctions for

differentiating between associational types and democratic functions bring much-needed clarity to the virtual terrain of online communities, and to the relationship between particular features of associations and specific effects of democracy. This dissertation employs Warren's conceptual framework to conduct a cultural analysis of online communities.

How does one identify or study the culture of virtual communities? First, it is necessary to clarify the concept of "culture" being used in this study. The endeavor of examining the culture of virtual communities is significant in itself for the very effort works against the popular notion that the Internet and computer technology is primarily about the elimination of the spatial and temporal barriers to communication. Such a view assumes the "transmission model" of communication, reducing the technology to its instrumentality, and fails to take into account all that communication comprises in its socio-cultural context. Alternatively, a "ritual model" understands communication as a "symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (Carey 1989, p. 23). It highlights communication as sharing, participation, fellowship, and possession of common faith or understanding. Communication "operates to provide not information but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds, but to represent an underlying order of things, not to perform functions but to manifest an ongoing and fragile social process" (p. 19). For this reason, Carey asserts "communication as culture," using the term "culture" to refer to the everyday reality as perceived by ordinary people. Similarly, postmodern theorist Mark Poster (2001) views Internet technology through a cultural lens, seeing it as an institution that extends far beyond its instrumentality:

The Internet is more like a social space than a thing, so that its effects are more like those of Germany than those of hammers: the effect of Germany upon the people within it is to make them Germans (at least for the most part); the effect of hammers is not to make people hammers...but to force metal spikes into wood. As long as we understand the Internet as a hammer, we will fail to discern the way it is

like Germany. The problem is that modern perspectives tend to reduce the Internet to a hammer. In this grand narrative of modernity, the Internet is an efficient tool of communication, advancing the goals of its users, who are understood as preconstituted instrumental identities....But the aspects of the Internet that I would like to underscore are those which instantiate new forms of interaction and which pose the question of new kinds of relations of power between participants (p. 176-7).

For Poster and Carey, examining the effects of the Internet on our experience and expectations of communities and democracy requires viewing the Internet as being more than a sophisticated system of message exchange, but as an institution that works within not only a dynamic network of producers and users, but also a dynamic cultural and social order.¹ As an institution, technology is both cultural agent and cultural artifact—that is to say, an institution both created and experienced as a given reality. In this way, technology is conceptualized not only as being embedded with and designed according to a society's priorities and perception of reality, but also experienced as a coercive force that is integrally woven into a society's sense of objective reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Geertz 1973).

As such, technology is to be analyzed for both its structurally revolutionizing *and* reinforcing properties, for it is both “outcome/embodiment/product and medium/presupposition/ producer of social activity” (Jones 1995, p. 129). Dynamically

¹ The analysis in this dissertation is grounded in an institutional framework of cultural change (Thomas 1989; Wuthnow 1987; Schutz 1967; Douglas 1966; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Bourdieu 1984). To understand the dynamics of a particular culture requires the examination of a society's institutions and the primary categories that frame the institutions in question (Schutz 1967; Douglas 1966). Such categories can include the type of structure, the type of entities, the style of action of the entities, and the general type of authority that characterizes legitimate organizations (Thomas 1989, p.18). While these categories shape and justify the actions taken by individuals and institutions within a society, they also reflect an underlying structure that Thomas calls, “the cultural environment” (Douglas 1966; Levi-Strauss 1963). This cultural environment serves as a backdrop to a variety of institutional spheres, and the legitimacy and justification of institutions depend on the extent of similarity found between an institution's categories and that of the cultural environment. Thus, online communities exist within a matrix of other institutions that tend to reflect particular cultural orders, which is in turn legitimated by and legitimates other institutions (Thomas 1989). Understanding a technology's process of institutionalization this way can also act as a lens that brings into focus what a society privileges, dismisses, and takes for granted.

engaged in the social construction of our reality, technology reflects pre-existing tendencies that are characteristic of modern life and shapes our social practices by forming our everyday environments, and creating new ways of thinking, imagining and enacting the most basic aspects of life. This understanding of culture extends beyond the view of culture as values, attitudes and opinions, or culture as a toolkit where culture is reduced to a set of instruments to be applied to particular situations. Rather, *culture is "a set of institutionalized rules that infuse people and their actions with meaning and value"* (Thomas 1989, p. 14).

Therefore, in the methodological tradition of studying language and practices as a means of studying culture (Bellah et al. 1985; Bourdieu 1984), I take the structural features of online communities that shape the practices of participation and membership to be not merely an expression of an ethereal culture or "values," but are themselves—as they are experienced, perceived, and involved in the practices of the everyday reality of online group members—its culture. Following Carey's view of communication as culture, this approach understands that culture is being embedded within the very institutions that they suffuse. These technological features function as "plausibility structures," aspects of the environment that structure action and beliefs. Because a culture is always articulated and its meaning shared, culture is identifiable in its discursive nature. In his discursive study of political commitment (1996), Paul Lichterman writes, "*Talk* about commitment matters...because talk reveals the categories and definitions that activists or volunteers have available for imagining how they can practice mutual responsibility, how they can build community" (p. 22).

While exploring how individuals themselves might articulate their experience of membership, motivation, or participation can yield very significant indicators about the

efficacy of a group, this study is not so much concerned with how individuals act and express themselves as it is interested in how the design and implementation of virtual communities express conceptions of community and membership in the everyday settings of online interaction. Will entry into the community involve high or low barriers? Will the implied and stated social code of behavior promote radical autonomy or tight control? How will rules be enforced? What software tools and services will be provided for participants and users? The study of the structures of online communities not only reveals a sense of what membership and participation mean, but within the highly normative environment of virtual community building, it also indicates idealized and normative notions of what communities ought to be. Questions of rules and codes ultimately are matters of how one envisions the practices and enactment of authority. Who will have the authority and how it will shape the resulting community?

The findings of this dissertation are based on a qualitative content analysis of thirty virtual communities that examines their institutional and structural conditions—identifying the standards and practices of membership and participation found in the groups' websites and discussion forums. I explore how online communities define "community" and "participation," and what assumptions they must share in order to practice this form of community and participation together. Therefore, in this study of virtual communities, the overall question under consideration is not so much whether online communities are good or bad for American public life, but rather what is gained and what is lost in the online experience? To what extent do online communities dramatize the dominant cultural order, and to what extent do they introduce a significantly new reality? The issue of online communities and their democratic efficacy provides a lens through which I explore the ways

that communication and social solidarity are experienced online. Drawing on the cross-cutting concerns from the literatures of political theory, sociology, cultural theory, and communications studies, my hope is that this research would lead to a more thorough consideration of the ways in which social institutions and technology work dialectically to shape not only the pragmatic and substantive realities of sustaining a democracy, but the very landscape of our imaginations, influencing our conceptions of community and the self, freedom and human flourishing.

OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION

In the following chapter, I survey the existing literature, beginning with a look at how communication technologies have historically been looked to as an answer to the central problems troubling American democratic society. I discuss how the online community literature tends to be limited in its capacity to illuminate the actual culture and practices of virtual communities and often ends up representing thinly veiled versions of entrenched political or technological ideologies. Chapter Three presents an overview of the structural features common to online groups and addresses the requirements and expectations of membership that can be found in the structural and organizational realities of the communities. Chapter Four offers an alternative approach to conceptualizing online groups that builds on Mark Warren's theory of associations, asserting that specific features of online groups cultivate particular democratic effects. I apply Warren's typologies to the sample of online groups and compare between groups in order to address the ways that they vary in democratic efficacy. Chapter Five examines the influence of the market on the construction and maintenance of online communities. After briefly surveying the history of the political

economy of the Internet, I consider the ways that the logic of commodification renders online members as consumers and the communities as services. Finally, Chapter Six concludes the study with a brief summary and discussion of the significance online communities have on the future of American democracy and public life.

CHAPTER TWO

MEDIA, TECHNOLOGY AND DEMOCRACY: DEBATING THE "COMMUNITY" PROBLEM

Lolling in your underwear in front of an electronic screen while accessing with dancing fingers the pixels generated by anonymous strangers across the world is not my idea of forging a community of concern or establishing common ground, let alone cementing a trusting friendship. If large-scale modern societies are already troubled by isolation, civic alienation, and a decline of trust, a cyberpolitics rooted in apartness hardly seems to offer appropriate remedies.

-Benjamin Barber

I resent the shallowness of the critics who say that if you sit in front of a computer and participate in online conversations worldwide you are not leading an authentic life. I question the premise that one person can judge the authenticity of another person's life. Millions of people passively watch television all day long. Don't tell me that having an email relationship with someone on the other side of the world is less authentic than sitting alone and watching the tube. For many people, this new medium is a way of breaking out of the virtual world they already live in.

-Howard Rheingold

The Internet's unprecedented convergence of broadcasting, print, telecommunication, and computer industries has evoked both hope and fear: hope that this new media technology might provide a new and dynamic arena of civic engagement; and fear that the Internet will fail to engender the types of communities necessary for a vibrant civic culture, and will simply produce the same sorts of pseudo-communities that many link to television and other media. The scholarly literature on the Internet, virtual communities and their democratic efficacy represents a wide range of enthusiasts and pessimists. Skeptics worry that the Internet will merely succeed in transferring Americans from passively sitting in front of their televisions to passively sitting in front of their computers. Meanwhile, enthusiasts argue that, unlike the television, the Internet is an inherently social medium. While real world civic interactions might be declining—they say—online activity is on the rise, and the Internet has a unique capacity to connect people to each other, transcending spatial and temporal

limitations. Unlike the one-to-many nature of broadcasting media, the Internet's decentralized point-to-point capacity to both transmit information and facilitate interactivity suggests the possibility of an active citizenry.

As I will show in this chapter, these differences in perspectives often depend on assumptions about the nature of technology and the constitution of communities that are not always specified or articulated. Until the assumed conceptions of technology and logics of argument undergirding these assessments are brought to the surface and further scrutinized, I argue that analyses of online communities will continue to merely reflect the well-rehearsed differences between liberals and communitarians about the true nature of "community." Let us first begin by historically locating the current debates about the Internet within the larger history of communication and broadcast technologies.

THE HERITAGE OF COMMUNICATION HOPE

The ongoing debates about the democratic efficacy of online communities recapitulate a long history of hopes and fears about how mass media might influence American community and democracy. On the one hand, the Internet seems to follow the tradition of communication technologies that have preceded it. Valued for its ability to render barriers of geography and distance virtually obsolete, the Internet—like the telephone and the telegraph—promises to improve interpersonal communication and provide a solution to the modern conditions of mobility where increasing miles span between families and friends (Czitrom 1982; Fischer 1992). On the other hand, the Internet is also cautiously linked to the broadcast tradition of radio and television. While the one-to-many capacities of broadcast technologies have the potential to help redistribute power away from the elites and act as a

key source for information (Meyrowitz 1985), the tradition of broadcast mass media has often been troubled by its possible tendencies to atomize individuals and displace their time and energy from social and communal experiences. While Howard Rheingold defends the authenticity and benefits of online communication in the above quote, many scholars wonder whether the Internet will ultimately unfold in the American cultural tradition of the television or that of the telephone.

The deep ambivalence that has characterized the relationship between technologies and the conditions of modernity was once poignantly captured by Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1989):

One would like to ask: is there, then no positive gain in pleasure, no unequivocal increase in my feeling of happiness, if I can, as often as I please, hear the voice of a child of mine who is living hundreds of miles away or if I can learn in the shortest possible time after a friend has reached his destination that he has come through the long and difficult voyage unharmed?...But...if there had been no railway to conquer distances, my child would never have left his native town and I should need no telephone to hear his voice; if traveling across the ocean by ship had not been introduced, my friend would not have embarked on his sea-voyage and I should not need a cable to relieve my anxiety about him. (p. 40)

Freud's capacity to consider technology both a creation of and solution to our modern discontents mirrors the tendency among modern Americans to simultaneously embrace technological progress, while blaming technology for the weakened state of community and social solidarity.

While new technological developments have been usually welcomed with enthusiasm and optimism, the voices of caution and dissent have been close at hand. As the telegraph was heralded for separating the relationship between physical transportation and communication, allowing the instantaneous transmittance of information, Henry Thoreau's famous skepticism argued that the telegraph was merely

“an improved means to an unimproved end....We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate....We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world some weeks nearer to the new; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough” (1957, p. 36).

In the same way, while there are a few vocal skeptics who consider much of the current content on the Internet to rival the triviality of a princess' whooping cough, the majority of scholars and observers are optimistic that the Internet can in fact help to enhance civic culture. This hope carries on a heritage of technological optimism that can be easily traced throughout American cultural history and even at the inception of American mass communication research.

In the thought and work of Charles Cooley and John Dewey, there is a strong progressive belief that media technology will restore moral and political consensus to the troubled modern conditions brought on by the social ruptures of industrialization and urbanization (Czitrom 1982). While Dewey believed that mass communication would open the possibility of consensus through the dispersal of relevant news and information, Cooley trusted that in solving the “structural problem” of communication—eliminating the barriers of distance from communication—the unity formerly experienced only in local, small *gemeinschaft* relations would be extended to the larger society and public. In contrast to these early social theorists of communication, the Frankfurt School offered a very different analysis of mass media, viewing it as an instrument of totalitarianism that atomized individuals into mindless conformity. Rather than ensuring solidarity, media was the very means through which local civil society would be destroyed and mass society would be cultivated.

In response, there have been repeated attempts in American communication research to show that any harmful effects of media are buffered by social networks of conversation or that electronic media actually help to instantiate a Durkheimian mechanical solidarity among the dispersed audience (e.g., Katz and Lazarsfeld's *Personal Influence* and Dayan and Katz's *Media Events*). The living room in which people gathered to watch television was argued to be a new form of "public" and the sheer spectatorship a new form of public involvement. In the funerals of statesmen and celebrities, the moon landing, the Olympics, high-profile court cases, and most recently the on-air devastation of September 11th, the ritualistic power of television contributes to the formation of public experience and national memory (Cerulo and Ruane 1998). Critiques of these notions of "public" and civic "involvement" for being overly thin conceptions of social solidarity and political culture have been a part of the ongoing debates over the role that mass media plays in American democracy. In this way, as one scholar notes: "American mass communication research has always been about more than mass communication....One can read the American tradition of thought about the media as a series of attempts to theorize human solidarity by means of the terms and technologies of communication" (Simonson 1996, p. 324). Overall, however, the dominant tradition in communication research is one of, what Paul Simonson calls: "communication hope"—the hope that communication itself "might bring about a new and perhaps unprecedented unity among people" (p. 333). Social theorists throughout American history have expressed communication hope, drawing upon "the aura of communication as a notion inextricably tied up with its terministic cousins, communion and community" (p. 333). Turning our attention to the latest technology of the Internet, and its online

communities in particular, it is clear that the tradition of communication hope continues to resonate.

Since the inception of the Internet, optimism about the growing trends of online participation have been fueled by utopian visions of technologists and enthusiasts about how the Internet would radically change our lives and the ways that we interact with each other. Rhetoric from politicians, scholars and pundits frequently carry the hopes of how the Internet might bring fundamental change to the processes of communication, having the effect of restructuring relationships both on the interpersonal private and collective public level. These utopian promises of the Internet and computer technology are quite familiar to us by now. Critic and political theorist Langdon Winner deftly retells one of the common myths that we have been told about the computer and Internet:

What water- and steam-powered machines were to the industrial age, the computer will be to the era now dawning. Ever-expanding technical capacities in computations and communications will make possible a universal, instantaneous access to enormous quantities of valuable information. As these technologies become less and less expensive and more and more convenient, all the people of the world, not just the wealthy, will be able to use the wonderful services that information machines make available. Gradually, existing differences between rich and poor, advantaged and disadvantaged, will begin to evaporate. *Widespread access to computers will produce a society more democratic, egalitarian, and richly diverse than any previously known....* With the personal computer serving as the great equalizer, rule by centralized authority and social class dominance will gradually fade away. *The marvelous promise of a "global village" will be fulfilled in a worldwide burst of human creativity* (1986, p. 102-103 [emphases mine]).

A tale similarly told by Nicholas Negroponte, founder of the MIT Media Lab, in his best-selling book, *Being Digital*, promises that:

While the politicians struggle with the baggage of history, a new generation is emerging from the digital landscape free of many of the old prejudices....Digital technology can be a natural force drawing people into greater world harmony.... But more than anything...the access, the mobility, the ability to effect change are what will make the future so different from the present (1995, p. 229, 230, 231).

Such inflated rhetoric suggests that democracy is on the cusp of rounding a corner to a brighter future—achieving much of what always has been impossible, correcting what has gone wrong in the past. Implicit in these claims is the strong belief that digital technology will *naturally* motivate global harmony and revolutionize the entire social and political world. Though such promises and claims can be easily dismissed as deterministic and ridiculously utopian, their dominant presence in the technological imagination of Americans seem to continually overshadow more modest hopes and even-keeled observations about the Internet.

DOMINANT APPROACHES TO THE INTERNET AND DEMOCRACY

The current literature on online communities and their democratic potential can be divided into three basic approaches which distinguish themselves on the basis of their particular conceptualization of technology. They either address technology in terms of (1) its effect on the *quantity* of social ties; (2) its effect on *altering* conditions of sociability; or (3) its effect on *reproducing* or reinforcing existing conditions of sociability. In the following section, I will survey the contours of each approach and show that age-old contentions about the conditions of American communal life cast long shadows over how online communities are conceptualized and analyzed. In this overview of arguments and analyses of online interactions, I want to suggest that one of the consequences of importing particular views of community or democracy into these analyses is that far less energy is devoted to examining precisely how the computer-mediated characteristics of anonymity, choice, and lack of physical presence work to form particular dynamics of social interaction and solidarity.

Technology's Effect on the Quantity of Social Ties

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam argues that increased television viewing is the key variable responsible for tempting individuals away from neighborly sociability and the public sphere at large. Does increased Internet use function in the same way? Like Putnam, many scholars consider the democratic potential of the Internet and its online communities to be dependent on their capacity to increase communication or social interactions in circumstances that, until now, have been prohibitively expensive, inconvenient, or technologically impossible. Many of the counterarguments to Putnam's lament about the decline in social capital, in fact, point to the pervasive use of the Internet for social and communal purposes. Several researchers have been testing this claim by conducting quantitative studies on the effect of the Internet on people's degree of sociability. As the numbers of those who have Internet access have continued to increase, these empirical studies have yielded very conflicting results, at best suggesting that many ambiguities still persist about whether the Internet fosters or inhibits social connectedness.¹

On the one hand, several studies report that Internet use leads to decreased sociability. One even goes so far as to suggest that "the Internet could be the ultimate isolating technology that further reduces our participation in communities even more than did automobiles and television before it" (Nie quoted by O'Toole 2000). Of these, two of the most prominent studies—a two-year computer monitoring study from Carnegie Mellon University (Kraut et al. 1998) and a self-report study conducted by Stanford University (Nie and Erbring 2000)—show that regular Internet users cut back on their social ties and grow increasingly isolated. Other studies report that while mainstream media coverage of the

¹ For excellent discussions of this literature, see James Katz and Ronald Rice's *Social Consequences of Internet Use* and Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite's *The Internet in Everyday Life*.

Internet is filled with extraordinary stories about new friendships and even romances that develop through online channels, less than one-third of Internet users report to having met a new friend via email or the Internet (Wired/Merrill Lynch Forum Digital Citizen Survey 1997; Katz and Aspden 1997). Despite all the hype about chat rooms and online communities, Pew's 2000 Trust and Privacy Survey shows that 60% of all respondents have never been in a chat room or made new friends online.

Kraut et al.'s Carnegie Mellon studies (1998, 2002) assert that while the Internet is primarily used for interpersonal communication, it seems to actually weaken levels of face-to-face social engagement and psychological well-being, displacing not only time with family and friends, but also time spent watching television and shopping. The follow-up study conducted in 2002 also suggests that the Internet tends to improve sociability only for those people who are already extroverted, rather than those who are introverted. Furthermore, the original study finds that, in comparison to their condition before regular Internet use, Internet users become more depressed and experience increased levels of stress. Though effects of depression seemed to have lessened in the follow-up study, the results still show that stress levels remain quite high. This latter study also provides evidence of declines in local knowledge and desire to live in a local area—arguably lowering the commitment to local communities over all—among those individuals with increased Internet use.

These findings support the suspicions and fears that social ties will become increasingly located online rather than within “bricks-and-mortar” communities (Doheny-Farina 1996). Critics of the Carnegie Mellon studies contend that their results do not capture typical Internet use, since it tracks the effects of the Internet during an individual's initial months and years of online activity, thus arguably indicating the behavioral patterns that

arise from inexperience or initial Internet enthusiasm. While these studies are certainly limited by their particular methodology, their findings of more extreme tendencies of Internet use may accurately reflect the Internet's effects on the most active and intensive Internet users: those of the younger generations. One study found that, among 16-18 year olds, up to one-third of those surveyed admitted that "they find it easier to meet people online than in the flesh" (Cole 2001). Concerns for new pathologies observed among young children and teenagers who spend a lot of time on the Internet, have yielded terms such as 'tech-abuse'—an increased difficulty in relating to real people—or 'technoautism'—the inability to express one's emotions without the aid of new technologies (Zenit News Service 2003). Overall, these studies on the Internet's effects on social ties support the idea that, like the television, the Internet tends to decrease "real world" sociability and communal involvement.

On the other hand, several studies suggest that the Internet is very useful in combating the individualizing effects of today's economic, cultural and social realities. Together, these studies clearly show that the longstanding connection between *physical* isolation and *social* isolation is fast becoming obsolete. More akin to the telephone, many surveys report that Internet use primarily consists of emailing pre-existing family and friends (Pew Internet & American Life Project 2000; Wellman 1999). According to the March 2000 Pew Internet and American Life Survey, 55% of Internet users said that email improved their family connections, and 66% reported to have improved their connections with significant friends. In fact, 26 million Americans reported to have reestablished regular communication with family members through email. Illustrative of how powerful the Internet can be in helping individuals rekindle old connections, it is notable that one of the

most successful and lucrative services available via the Internet are "people-search" services. In 2001, the website *Classmates.com* invites its potential customers to "find your old friends again" and has registered nearly one million people who are paying \$29.50 a year for the chance to reach childhood friends, with an additional 17 million people who have entered themselves in the free alumni directory (Walker 2001). These findings and examples support the argument that the Internet primarily functions as a supplementary form of social contact (Quan-Haase and Wellman 2003; Cole 2001; Uslaner 2000; Robinson et al. 2000).

However, much of the excitement about the Internet has been focused on its capacity to help expand people's social networks. Some scholars argue that the Internet, in fact, does succeed in widening an individual's circles of friends and acquaintances, with many even leading to "real world" friendships (Robinson et al. 2000; Parks and Floyd 1996; Wellman and Gulia 1999). The 2001 study conducted by the UCLA Center for Communication Policy finds that more than 25% of Internet users have made online friends that they have yet to meet in person and 12% have met their new virtual friends in real world settings (Cole 2001). Another study reports that 60% of those participants in newsgroups made friends (Parks and Floyd 1996). According to the 2000 General Social Survey, up to 30% of web users reported going to chat rooms, newsgroups or bulletin boards. Notably, the number of Internet users who use chat rooms increases tremendously for Internet users under the age of 25 (Nie and Erbring 2000). According to the Ipsos-Reid 2001 International Study, over 70% of Internet users under the age of 24 use chat rooms frequently, with almost half of those participants carrying ongoing email exchanges with those whom they

met in chat rooms.² In real-time text-based virtual environments that involve intensive role-playing, one-third of participants maintain online relationships and one-third of these online relationships resulted in face-to-face meetings (Ryan 1995; Parks and Roberts 1997). In case studies of online groups that are highly interactive, structured, or serve purposes that reach beyond leisure activities, the rates of new friendships increase. Over half of recovering addicts on electronic support groups also contact and call others by phone or in person (Wellman et al. 1996).

Though skeptics worry about how increased online interactions within far-flung relationships will affect local and household ties, some studies find that it has also improved social interactions among those who live within the same vicinity. The UCLA study reports that nearly 50% of users spend time online each week *with* other household members. The study even went so far as to call the Internet a "shared household activity." At worst, nearly all Internet users were reported to spend not less, but about the same amount of time or more together with members of their household.³ In a case study of an entirely wired Toronto suburb (that is, for this study, every household of a given suburb was provided with Internet technologies), the Internet was found to strengthen local ties within neighborhoods and households (Wellman 1999; Hampton and Wellman 2003). The suburb's Internet users were reported to recognize three times as many of their neighbors and spoke with two times as many neighbors as their non-Internet using counterparts (Hampton and Wellman 2001). Reminiscent of early images of the television as the "electronic hearth," when families and

² It is interesting to note that only 16% of American urban youth have gone on to meet their correspondents face-to-face—comparably lower rates than urban teenagers in Asia (37%) and Latin America (Mexico 29% and Brazil 28%).

³ Noticeably absent in the survey summary and discussion is the finding that approximately 25% of respondents also reported to sometimes feeling ignored because someone in their home was using the Internet too much.

neighbors gathered to watch a program together, the study reports of one family that has established a Saturday evening ritual of gathering together with a bowl of popcorn in front of the computer (Wellman 1999, p. 6)! Even if this particular example seems rather anomalous, at the very least, many argue that the Internet can not be easily dismissed as a threat to communal bonds. For in comparing the social participation of Internet users and nonusers, a compelling number of studies find no difference in individuals' membership in various organizations or amount of time spent communicating with friends or family (Katz and Aspden 1997; Cole 2001; Robinson et al. 2000).

These quantitative findings will continue to represent the two opposing sides of the debate over the Internet's impact on sociability; however, it is worth noting that the skeptics and enthusiasts who rely on this evidence actually share an important premise in their argument. Underlying this clash of data often is a shared conception of technology as a tool. That is to say, in evaluating the overall impact of the Internet on communal life, the focus is placed on the Internet's mechanical capacity to facilitate communication across time and space. From this perspective, the most significant dimension of computer-mediated communication is its ability to foster "efficient social contact" (Jones 1995a). When applied to understanding technology's influence on cultivating a robust political culture, this mechanical approach to technology often leads to the easy assumption that an increase in volume of communication and breadth of social networks guarantees an increase in social capital and civic-mindedness. In this view, as Cooley believed, the problem of democracy is primarily an issue of "plumbing;" improving democracy is a simple matter of unclogging the communication pipes, making them more open, more accessible to all.

While it is certainly the case that if these empirical studies had revealed that no one was communicating or gathering together, there would be no associational life to even speak of, it would be premature to rest an entire argument concerning the Internet's effects on democracy on this one measure of social ties. For even if the Internet should indeed lead to an increase in *quantity* of social connectedness, the *quality* of that connectedness remains in question. For example, if the quality of communication is one characterized by incivility and verbal hostility as some have observed about online culture, inclinations to celebrate would be severely dampened. Not only does this approach neglect how technological mediation might qualitatively shape the nature of social relations, but it also suggests that the strengthening of communities and democracy is merely a matter of increasing sociability. While the ongoing research about the Internet's effect on the quantity of social ties can provide the necessary data for understanding how the Internet is being used, it unfortunately gets appropriated to support a pre-determined position about the Internet and its impact on democracy.

Rather than understanding technology in purely functional terms and focusing on its effect on the quantity of social ties, many scholars have emphasized the significance of the quality of communication or interactions. The approaches to understanding the quality and character of social bonds that dominate the technological literature stem from two main traditions: technological determinism and social constructivism. The former, technological determinism, focuses on technology as an agent of change in the broader social landscape; it views technology as "revolutionizing" or altering the conditions of sociability. The latter, social constructivism, views technology as an artifact that reflects the existing social order; it views technology as "reproductive" or mirroring the conditions of sociability. While both

Internet enthusiasts and skeptics alike draw from these traditions, the fundamental conceptualizations of the relationship between technology and society yield very different stories about how the Internet will influence communal life in America. In the following section, I will explore each tradition, its application, and its assumptions about online communities and their impact on civic participation.

Technology's Effect on Altering Conditions of Sociability

For decades, communication and media theorists have been frustrated by the common conception of technology as a mere tool and have worked to complexify how we understand technology. Scholars who work within the tradition of Marshall McLuhan and medium theory, for example, assert that what causes technological change is not the "content" or intended function of a technology, but the medium itself, the technical and structural features that make up the technological artifact. Applied to Internet-supported communication, this view considers technology not as a neutral tool that merely opens channels of communication where there were none before, but a medium that exerts coercive and deterministic power over an individual's entire phenomenological experience of social interaction. This perspective views the implementation and institutionalization of technology to be a process of irrevocably altering the broader social landscape, shaping the lived experiences of individuals and societies alike in their everyday practices and perceptions of reality, often in unintended and indirect ways (Postman 1985; Innis 1951; Meyrowitz 1995; Mumford 1963; Altheide 1995).

In conceptualizing the Internet as a technology that alters the conditions of sociability, claims about online communities and their effects often rely on comparisons

between computer-mediated and face-to-face communication. Consequently, much attention is paid to the manner in which the current technological features of online communities allow for limited transmission of nonverbal cues, anonymity in social interaction and loose definition of group membership. As I will discuss later in this section, while this approach lends to a more qualitatively robust assessment of online communities, its underlying logic still raises significant problems when it comes to assessing and evaluating how well online groups cultivate habits and dispositions that are helpful to democratic practices.

In the communications literature on computer-mediated communication, the early studies on computer mediation were focused on the altered terms of communication and social interaction within the context of the workplace. While concerns about mediated communication were hardly new, having been previously addressed over earlier technologies like the telegraph and telephone (Marvin 1988), they were expressed anew through the "cues filtered-out" approach which drew on social presence theory and social context cues theory from the social psychology literature (Lombard and Ditton 1997; Walther and Burgoon 1992). In the "cues filtered-out" approach, the lack of media richness inherent in computer mediation was considered to make it an inadequate transmitter of emotion, humor and other nuances (e.g., irony, sarcasm) normally exercised in face-to-face encounters through facial expressions, voice inflection or other non-verbal cues (Walther and Burgoon 1992; Reid 1991).

This 'bias of communication' inherent to computers was evident in studies showing that, in the workplace, some people preferred face-to-face contact for socially sensitive, difficult or ambiguous situations and others used computer mediation intentionally to "maintain social distance, document contentious issues, or when the message involves fear,

dislike, awkwardness, or intimidation" (Wellman et al. 1996). From the beginning, the initial assumption was that computer-mediated communication would be impersonal, distant, and limited in its capacity to convey meaningful communication, thus making computer mediation an unlikely form of technology that would enhance social interactions and democracy in a significant way.

Furthermore, great concern often has been raised about how the lack of visual cues and physical presence in computer-mediated communication releases people from particular social demands that have traditionally guided people's treatment of each other in face-to-face settings. For skeptics, the narrow capacity to transmit nonverbal cues is interpreted as a negative aspect: one that not only prevents the fostering of social affective ties, but also renders online incivility likely (Baron 1984; Schmitz 1997; Kiesler et al. 1984). Shielded by the non-visual, non-embodied nature of interactions online, individuals are freed from the social inhibitions that keep incivility and hostility in check during face-to-face interactions (Kiesler 1984; Rice 1984; Sproull and Kiesler 1991). The quality of online discourse can quickly deteriorate to mere "rants" or "flame wars." Such incivility is quite "contagious [as] one flame often generates a host of bandwagon insults again because it is so easy..." (McLaughlin, Osbourne, Smith 1995, p. 105). Fear that these hostile practices would jeopardize the level of public discourse and end up creating a more difficult and contentious environment than that of the usual face-to-face setting, has prevented many observers from believing that diverse communities online could find ways to deliberate and debate productively.

Yet, enthusiasts tout computer mediation's capacity to create unusually "safe" environments where traditionally marginalized people are free to finally interact with others

without the usual hindrances of their stigmatized physical appearance or social status (Turkle 1995; Baym 1995). The same loss of nonverbal cues and physical presence that opens the door to verbal abuse in anonymous circumstances also introduces an egalitarianism (Walther 1992; Baron 1984; Kiesler et al. 1984; Hiltz and Turoff 1978). Increases in self-esteem and collective sense of identity have been reported among those who have concealable stigmatized identities and have found support groups online. Some claim that computer mediation functions as a "medium dedicated to the primacy of the spirit," allowing Internet users to express their "true selves" (Rheingold 1993; Van Gelder 1984; Miller and Slater 2000). As a result, many hope that computer-mediated communities may resolve the problems of discrimination and exclusion that have often plagued face-to-face communities. Many claim that virtual communities can promote a quality of fraternalism, inclusivity, and egalitarianism that is often hard to find in conventional communities or associations (Brint 2001; Rheingold 1993; Walther 1992; Baron 1984; Hiltz and Turoff 1978; Van Gelder 1984).

A second factor highlighted by qualitative evaluations of online communities is computer mediation's capacity to create environments of *anonymous* social interactions. Skeptics worry that anonymity introduces not only a lack of accountability in what people say online, but also the possibility of constructing false or misleading online personas. This manipulation of identity threatens the ideals of authenticity and honesty in social interactions (Van Gelder 1984; Reid 1994; Slouka 1995). Postmodern critics even go so far as to suggest that relationships in cyberspace are mere simulation of actual interactions and poor substitutes for the essential features of co-presence and face-to-face interaction (Baudrillard 1988; Jameson 1991). How can trust and commitment be cultivated in an environment where identities are so fluid and unpredictable within anonymous and pseudonymous

interactions? Enthusiasts, however, consider the condition of anonymity to be a boon, providing a means of exploring new degrees of vulnerability or new identities (Turkle 1995; Baym 1995). They argue that the control of one's identity online through the construction of personas rightly problematizes the ideals of face-to-face communication and reinforces postmodern claims that the self is essentially mutable and multiple in nature (Turkle 1995; Gergen 1991; Lifton 1993). Cyberspace offers liberation from the essentialist claims of gender, for example, allowing individuals to deconstruct and transcend the performative character of all social relationships and identities by way of gender swapping (Haraway 1996; Turkle 1995; Baym 1995; Myers 1987; Reid 1991). They are useful and safe opportunities to therapeutically explore multiple personas by experimenting with new degrees of vulnerability or promiscuity. While many argue that such "impression management" has always been a part of face-to-face interactions (Goffman 1959), it is hard to deny that online interactions give individuals an unprecedented amount of control in the construction of their personas.

As Mark Poster (2001) asserts,

the relation of cyberspace to material human geography is decidedly one of rupture and challenge to existing identity configurations. In this sense, Internet communities function as places of difference from and resistance to modern society....They are places not of the presence of validity claims or the actuality of critical reason, but of the inscription of new assemblages of self-constitution (p. 187).

These online conditions of anonymity and limited expression of nonverbal cues work together to not only alter interpersonal relationships, but arguably entire group dynamics, membership, and identity. First and foremost, formal membership in virtual communities is made very difficult to enforce. Structurally, most online groups have weak entry and exit costs (Galston 1999; Jones 1997). Becoming a member often only requires registering with a user name and email address. Since maintaining membership is only contingent upon posting messages, it is practically impossible for a community to know the

cause of a person's absence or failure to post more messages, unless the information is volunteered. Pairing the anonymity and mutability of identity with the irrelevance of geographic constitution for a community, members can leave or "disappear" at any moment (MacKinnon 1995).

When members can manipulate identities or disassociate from the group with no apparent cost, the community's ability to enforce norms is severely hampered. Online, members are welcome to merely "listen in" on exchanges and conversations vicariously, a practice commonly known as "lurking." Subsequent evidence shows that there are more readers than posters of messages in many groups (McLaughlin, Osbourne, Smith 1995). If anything, it is the individual member who possesses the means to exercise whatever sanctions he/she desires, for newsreader software can customize their received information to exclude groups, topics or authors of their choice. In these circumstances, individuals have full control to manage their interactions within an online community, and they are no longer privy to unexpected encounters with community members they dislike or who are unlike themselves.

Those who are skeptical of online communities' capacity to enhance democracy fear that low communal boundaries and norms will lead individuals to avoid the burdens of obligation or commitment (Galston 1999). As online communities are increasingly framed as communities of choice, they worry that these groups will merely become "lifestyle enclaves" and result in "cyber-balkanization" (Bellah 1985; Levine 2000; Sunstein 2000; Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson 1997). As lifestyle enclaves, online communities would rarely seek to work towards external public goods since its primary purpose would be the fulfillment of individual needs (Bellah 1985). In addition, because the Internet is configured in a manner

that prevents online communities from having to engage in mutual contact with other groups in the online associational terrain, scholars contend that online communities may tend towards extremist positions and discourage civil discourse among people of difference (Sunstein 2001; Levine 2000; Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson 1997).

Countering these concerns, proponents of virtual communities argue that these structural realities allow individuals to find their own social niche, free from the "accidents of proximity," and protects them from a group's arbitrary coercive power that might force them into undesirable degrees of commitment or obligation (Licklider and Taylor 1968). Not only does the detachment of "community" and "geography" give individuals more flexibility and freedom in their involvement in groups, but it also expands the range of possible groups that exist, empowering lower-status and disenfranchised social groups (Mele 1996; Kollock and Smith 1996). They assert that normally marginalized groups can now thrive in an online culture and structure that promotes the ability to choose one's own community. Mobilization theorists view the Internet as a means for transforming political participation altogether by reducing the financial and social barriers that have often hindered civic engagement, widening the number of actors in political debates, and increasing the plausibility of a direct democracy (Norris 1999). In this view, activist groups have a stronger instrument of information dissemination and fundraising. The Internet's new forms of both horizontal and vertical communication promise to revolutionize the conventional modes of political activity.

Taking into consideration how computer mediation reframes and reshapes our experience of communication and our very conceptions of community is clearly necessary when evaluating how online communities might enhance American public life. However,

lurking in the backdrop of either the enthusiasts' or 'skeptics' account of technology's revolutionary nature are the dangers of technological determinism: an excessively strong notion of technology's autonomy and an overly weak notion of human agency. Claims that technology leads to unintended consequences can imply that technological forces are completely autonomous, stripping away any impetus to resist or reform whatever technological developments occur. Critical and feminist theorists of technology have voiced concern about the ways that the ideology of technological determinism can mask the political powers that are, in fact, being exercised through technology (Winner 1986; Wajcman 1995). In addition, because social and cultural effects are mainly attributed to the inherent features of a technology, there is a temptation to universalize its effects, failing to consider how the particular socio-cultural context shapes the use and influence of a technology. As I will discuss in the following section, many scholars have responded to these extremes of technological determinism and sought to re-emphasize the significant influence that social forces have on technology.

Technology's Effect on Reproducing Conditions of Sociability

Sociologists and historians of technology have often argued that technology hardly functions within a social or cultural vacuum, and that social structures and resources actually play highly formative roles in the production of a technology (Bijker, Hughes, and Pinch 1987; Bijker 1992; Smith and Marx 1994). Scholars in this social constructivist tradition have often emphasized the "reproductive" aspect of technology, primarily conceiving of technology as a product of society and therefore embedded with pre-existing cultural meanings in its design and usage. The vision of the world held by the designer or engineer is "inscribed" into

technology, and the "inscription" can continue to be interpreted flexibly and re-negotiated by the user of the technology (Akrich 1992). By detailing the social processes which shape how technologies are innovated and implemented, scholars within the social constructivist perspective seek to reassert the agency of human beings and society over technology. Technological change, like any social or cultural change, is viewed as a development that essentially reproduces and reinforces, rather than challenges, the existing social order.

From this perspective, the Internet is neither inherently progressive or detrimental to existing institutions, but reproduces the institutional reality that already dominates. If anything, online communities do not so much alter social reality as reflect pre-existing distributions of power and resources. Working out of the community studies tradition in sociology, Barry Wellman (1999) argues that online communities simply mirror the type of communities that already exist in our society. In response to those who lament the loss of geographic locality and physical embodiment in the virtual realm, Wellman asserts that to continue to think about the "community" in terms of a spatial relation or a kinship group is to be blind to the fact that the modern-day community fundamentally has become an "egocentric network" (Fischer 1975; Wellman 1979, 1994). Contemporary life has long since removed the community from a particular locality. Increased levels of mobility and trends in divorce have progressively weakened our sense of local and familial bonds. Even without the Internet, the modern person belongs to non-local social networks that are multiple and specialized rather than solitary and geographically-bounded. We already are limited-liability members of communities with loose and flexible boundaries (Wellman 1999; Wuthnow 1999). As Wellman and Gulia (1996) have suggested, we live in a time when

People do get all kinds of support from community members but they have to turn to different ones for different kinds of help. This means that people must maintain differentiated portfolios of ties to obtain a wide variety of resources. In market

terms, they must shop at specialized boutiques for needed resources instead of casually dropping in at a general store (1996, p. 171).

Therefore, according to this view, one might say that computer networks are the physical infrastructure of the social networks that we already have. Online communities are merely new forms of collectivities that function as offline communities already do. Whereas non-local offline social networks are still burdened by social and physical limitations, computer technology allows online communities to easily overcome those hindrances. While this argument can be taken as a rather sanguine interpretation of online communities, Wellman admits that online groups may further people's tendency to switch between partial, personal communities and to move between relationships, reinforcing more individualistic behavior that weakens the solidarity traditionally cultivated in stable place-based groups (Wellman et al. 1996).

Similarly, postmodern theorists argue that the democratic public sphere has long been displaced from the New England town hall, coffeehouse, union hall and bar, and is taken up by forms of media such as the television, newspaper, and magazines (Poster 1988, 2001). And as is commonly noted, our culture is already one in which "Public' tends more and more to slide into 'publicity as 'character' is replaced by 'image'" (Poster 2001, p. 17). In this way, the Internet and its virtual communities simply follow a long line of media technologies that have been transforming the landscape of the American public square.

Another line of argument commonly used to defend the legitimacy of online communities is the claim that they exhibit the same adaptive characteristics and responses to demands placed on any group or collective. Several works have demonstrated how online communities develop alternative systems of norms and standards of behavior that compensate for the lack of physical co-presence that usually regulates behavior and

communication (Baym 1995; Spears et al. 1990; MacKinnon 1995). Contrary to those who celebrate the anarchic potentials of online life, these scholars claim that, like their offline counterparts, online communities exhibit the capacity for shared standards of conduct, collective identity, established hierarchies and the means for organized social and political action (Watson 1997; McLaughlin, Osbourne, and Smith 1995). For example, online communication has been innovative in circumventing the lack of nonvisual cues by employing textual cues commonly known as emoticons. Punctuation has been used to "draw" expressions (e.g., the smiley-face emoticon :-)) and capital lettering has been deemed to signify excitement or yelling. Though no formal rules exist for online interaction, an informal "netiquette" acts as a set of guidelines for determining a wide range of "online duties," ranging from how one ought to respond to other email postings, to being mindful of bandwidth waste. These guidelines are often posted on the "FAQ" (which stands for "frequently asked questions") page of online groups which newcomers are expected to become familiar with before becoming regular participants.

In this way, online community members are often quite actively "promoting shared purposes, safeguarding the quality of group discussion, and managing scarce resources in what can be conceptualized as a virtual commons" (Galston 1999, p.6). This self-regulating nature is also evident in the frequency of conduct-correcting episodes over "reproachable conduct," including incorrect use of technology, violation of network-wide convention, violations of newsgroup-specific convention, ethical violations, inappropriate language and factual errors. Those who send spam, such as gratuitous advertisements, are often themselves spammed and sent hate-mail. These informal sanctions are expressed in various forms, from rebukes through private email to widespread campaigns (McLaughlin,

Osbourne, Smith 1995). As previously mentioned, censoring tools are sometimes available, allowing users to screen out or block the messages of a particular deviant user. In this light, online communities are active self-governing entities that create norms for social conduct when there were none to uphold, finding ways to creatively function and reinforce the norms of group life commonly found in conventional associations or communities.

While online communities express the dominant social order by the capacity to generate shared standards of conduct and means for organized action, skeptics argue that technology reproduces the pre-existing social order for the worst. They argue that the Internet reflects the same inequalities of power found among face-to-face groups. Whether it is according to new standards or traditional grooves of stratification (i.e., gender and social class), the concern is that the Internet will simply function to strengthen existing patterns of inequality (Watson 1997; McLaughlin, Osbourne, Smith 1995). Despite the removal of visual forms of discrimination or favoritism in computer-mediated communication, the text-based medium breeds new forms of hierarchy and respect by privileging verbal eloquence, wit, cleverness and technical savvy. These valued skills build the reputations and clout of group members (MacKinnon 1995; Watson 1997). The case of the Santa Monica community network, known for its success in including homeless people in the city's civic deliberations, is a classic example of the ironic nature of these new norms (Jones 1995b). For while the computer mediation granted homeless individuals a fair and just hearing of their grievances, in a way that would never have existed in a face-to-face context, it also tended to privilege and lend legitimacy to those homeless persons who were particularly educated and gifted in their writing style.

Other inequalities of power are structured into new standards of technological literacy and expertise. Applying Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to computer-mediated communication, Elizabeth Lane Lawley (1994) argues that "cultural capital in the form of expertise and experience using computer-mediated communication or through affiliation with a 'higher status system' is...used regularly to impose restrictions on other members of the field" (p.7). The term "newbie" or "wizard" indicate a hierarchy that ranges from the new and unsophisticated users who show ignorance or inexperience with a particular group's practices, to those veteran users who spend a lot of time participating in the group and often have administrative duties and privileges.

Furthermore, skeptics point out that the norms in gender and race are not eliminated from online interactions as many have hoped (Burkhalter 1996; O'Brien 1996; Van Gelder 1985; Kendall 2002; Lea and Spears 1995). In fact, stereotypes and prejudices seem to proliferate in these virtual settings of social uncertainty and non-visual interactions so that one finds misogyny, religious and racial hatred to be quite rampant online and even strident in tone. In the constructions of gendered or racially-defined online personas, stereotypes are reinforced and often exacerbated (Nakamura 2000). In contrast, some scholars have noted that there is a tendency to avoid matters of race or frown upon the identification of a racial characteristic altogether, reflecting a cultural taboo that often exists against bringing up the "race issue" and the hope that this point of conflict would just become a non-issue (Burkhalter 1996). Furthermore, the absence of race online promotes the tendency to assume that all those online are white. Sociologist Lori Kendall points to how the factors of race and social class often are not salient to the majority of the Internet users who are middle- to upper-class Caucasians and who do not usually think about race or class as being

a significant shaper of their identity. Therefore, Internet users often rely on a "digital default" assuming that when given no particular indication, other users are white, male, heterosexual, middle-aged, and middle- to upper-class (McLaine 2003, p. 235). According to this view, though computer mediation provides an altogether new set of conditions in which interactions take place, the dynamics of race and difference that have developed in online interactions seem to largely reflect the commonly adopted strategies of total war or complete indifference that already exist in society.

Considering the institution of the Internet as a whole, socioeconomic stratification continues to influence the Internet and its interactions in the digital divide that persists in the disparities of technological access and skills. The digital divide is at its worst on the global scale as industrial nations, representing 15% of the global population, make up 88% of Internet users. In the entire continent of Africa, one-half of 1% of the population has Internet access. The disparity in the very infrastructure of telecommunications, where one-quarter of the world's countries have less than one telephone for every 100 people, points to a profound degree of inequality (Levine 2000). Not surprisingly, the digital divide's tendency to amplify the already troubling gap in political participation among contrasting socioeconomic levels and demographic populations fuels significant doubt that the Internet and its online groups will substantively serve to enhance democracy (Owen and Davis 1998; Uslaner 2000).

Lastly, as the very design and structural options of the Internet are increasingly defined by commercial ends, skeptics point out that online communities fundamentally reinforce target groups of niche marketing. From hobbies to life-stage, ethnicity to religions, individuals are expected to choose to associate with people who share common

characteristics, status or preferences. The market metaphor of shopping for support is built into the very configuration of online communities so that the Internet ends up merely cultivating "categorical identities" that reflect existing market tendencies rather than fostering the "dense, multiplex and systematic webs of relationships" that are commonly promised (Calhoun 1996, p. 374). The concern is that the threat of the Internet is no longer based on an Orwellian fear of Big Brother, but rather a fear of the "soft new totalitarianism of consumerism" (Barber 1997). As media empires employ the same "narrowcasting" strategies that were used for cable television, the content on the Internet is falling under the auspices of smaller and smaller numbers of production companies. Signs of such "electronic colonialism" are evident, exacerbating the technological and economic inequalities that already exist between information-rich and information-poor regions of the world.

TANGLED IN THE "COMMUNITY" PROBLEM

What is common to all three of these approaches to analyzing online communities—whether these groups are ultimately regarded as catalysts of a new renaissance in political culture or threats to communal life altogether—is the logic of defining online communities in reference to offline communities. The study of community has conventionally centered on three key factors: place, numbers of ties, and quality of interaction. While this understanding has led naturally to emphasizing the Internet's capacity to reframe experiences of community from its traditional dimensions of geographic physical space and face-to-face communication to bodiless, spaceless, and computer-mediated interactions, it is this aspect of these arguments and analyses that so often makes them problematic. In many instances, because these debates over the effects of online communities have been rooted in a mass communication

literature that tends to privilege face-to-face interactions over all other forms of technologically-mediated interactions, ontological and normative questions have dominated the discourse so that debates concern contested understanding of "community" more than the technology itself.

In the early stages of the Internet and its developing cyberculture, the lack of place or physical embodiment commonly evoked questions about the metaphysical nature of online communities and relationships. Particularly relevant to postmodern inquiries, much ink was spilled over questions of the meaning and significance of participants engaging in an online group that is materially wired and culturally imagined, rather than geographically bounded and physically embodied as traditionally-conceived communities have been. As online group members commonly referred to their online communities as "places," Internet observers would provocatively ask: "Is there a there in cyberspace?" (Barlow et al. 1995). If locality or a physical group of people does not constitute the community, what does? Challenging traditional conceptions of communities, some suggest that the archive of email postings for a group is not merely a chronicle of what members have said, but actually the substance of the community and its activities themselves (Jones 1997). In this view, sheer communication defines the community, not physicality. Others assert that online communities are no different from Benedict Anderson's rendering of nation-states as "imagined communities;" they are products of collective imagination. And still, others question altogether the legitimacy of the reported romances and relationships taking place online, on the basis of particular criteria and definitions of "romance" and "relationship." In the end, while questions about the ontological status of online communities have played an important role in reinforcing postmodern inclinations to problematize our understandings of

the nature of "real" and "virtual," they tend to either short-circuit or derail any attempt to fully understand the social and cultural significance of online communities.

For those who have steered clear of the metaphysical debates about cyberspace, their analyses and evaluations of online communities have often been normatively framed, asking whether technologically-mediated communities can be considered "genuine" or "authentic" communities. Whether online groups are regarded as an improvement upon or an inferior copy of conventional communities or associations, this very comparison between computer-mediated interactions and face-to-face ones tends to make the issue a matter of whether they qualify as "real" communities (Etzioni 1997; Galston 1999; Driskell and Lyon 2002). That is, if online groups are found to have enough characteristics of "real" communities, they are considered "good" for democracy. Enthusiasts have offered ethnographic or journalistic accounts that attempt to demonstrate how mediated worlds of online culture are not inferior forms of social interactions, but are just as experientially fulfilling and meaningful in people's lives as face-to-face communities (Rheingold 1993; Turkle 1995; Markham 1998). Anecdotes of romantic relationships forming over the Internet (Brophy 1997; Toufexis 1996) and online communities rallying around a member who struggles with a terminal illness (Hafener 2001) put into question the tendencies to view online communities as inferior "pseudo-communities" (Beniger 1987; Cerulo and Ruane 1998; Wellman and Gulia 1999). As discussed earlier, some even argue that the computer mediation of online communities creates environments that support unprejudiced and "pure" interactions that are superior to those within face-to-face settings (Walther 1996; Parks and Floyd 1996; Parks and Roberts 1997). Skeptics counter these claims with critiques of how online groups lack the means to encourage sufficient mutual obligation or accountability, or how these communities of

choice only foster like-minded affiliations and promote shallow conceptions of “relationship” and “community.”

Because these assessments completely rely upon given conceptualizations of “real life” communities or associations, they usually end up referring to what is essentially a moving target. The criteria of a “real” community changes from person to person. One person’s “community” is another’s “lifestyle enclave” or “pseudo-community” (Bellah 1985; Beniger 1987). What one considers genuine “community” is mere “sociability” to another. Sociologist Craig Calhoun (1998), for example, asserts that those who argue that communities are flourishing within urban settings employ a weak notion of community. What they view as communities are merely “clusters of personal relationships characterized by some common identity and perhaps a bit of emotional warmth.” Others hold that online communities are only “real” to the extent that activities and interactions which occur online have a definable effect on offline behaviors (Galston 1999).

It is not surprising to find that much of the existing literature about online communities is grounded in the contested story of the modern community that traces back to classical sociology. From the nineteenth century, the classical social theorists regarded the dissolution and fragmentation of community life as a central feature of the shift from pre-modern to modern society. While each theorist believed different aspects of modernity defined its fundamental nature—for Max Weber, the process of rationalization; for Emile Durkheim, the increasing diversity and complexity of society; and for Karl Marx, capitalism—they were united in their concern for the impact of these social processes on the organization and experience of community.

The critical shift with which these theorists were fundamentally concerned is perhaps best typified by Ferdinand Toennies' distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* relations. According to Toennies, when the *gemeinschaft* relations of village life were overtaken by the *gesellschaft* relations of modern society, the defining nature of social relations shifted from being face-to-face, emotional, committed, and identity-forming, to being mediated, rational, transitory, and contractual (Toennies [1887] 1957). The classical social theorists shared Toennies' assumptions that human beings desire *gemeinschaft* relations, and as modern people, we continually long for that communal state of being. Weber's concern for the dehumanizing aspects of bureaucracies, Durkheim's concept of anomie, and Marx's notion of alienation all point to the atomizing tendencies characteristic of modernity.

Similarly, Georg Simmel's work frequently focused on the modern decline in group relations and the rise of rational individualism. In "The Metropolis and the Mental Life" ([1908] 1950), he contrasted the calculation and indifference of the cosmopolitan individual to the warm and intimate kinship of the rural dweller. Corresponding attempts to characterize the modern condition were made by Robert Park and David Riesman in their respective studies of "marginal man" and "inner-directed man," two ideal types who are stripped of meaningful identification with territorial community (Park 1952; Stonequist 1937; Riesman 1950; Nisbet 1976). More recently, in the works of Robert Putnam and Francis Fukuyama, the decade of the fifties has been used as their baseline for when communal and civic culture last thrived, being largely undermined in the sixties. Similarly, in the last three decades of the twentieth century in the United States, the "loss of community" thesis has emerged in the works of Robert Nisbet, Robert Bellah, Philip Selznick and Amitai Etzioni, fueling the emergence of the current communitarian movement. Working from the

anthropological premise that individuals find their sources of meaning and definitions of the self within their communities, communitarians argue that mere social connectedness is not sufficient when a thicker notion of a shared moral culture is absent (Etzioni 2001).

These claims about the decline in American communal life, however, are frequently criticized for being motivated by nostalgia. Many scholars have argued that romanticized views of face-to-face communities of old conveniently forget the social control and lack of individual freedom that often accompany the stability and richness of tight-knit communities. More extreme views regard the call to renew a sense of the common good in communities as simply an attempt to re-establish the hegemonic powers of a particular privileged class (Smelser and Alexander 1999). Thus, instead of regarding modernity negatively for its corrosive effects on community, these critics assert that modernity ought to be valued for the realization of that which we now take for granted: a person's individuality and self-determination (Brint 2001). According to this view, the modern community has not so much declined as progressed, adapting to the social and cultural developments of modernity (Wuthnow 1999).

Analytically speaking, traditionally-conceived dichotomies in group size and mode of connection grant preference and value to direct interactions that take place in small groups, when in fact the range of social relations possible is quite varied under diverse circumstances (Ruane and Cerulo 1998). Empirically, the most revealing studies of the modern community and social solidarity have focused on the social relations and organization of the modern city. As a case study, the phenomenon of urbanization richly dramatized the increased plurality, freedom and anonymity characteristic of modernity. While the structural reality of urban settings was presumed to be alienating (Weber [1921] 1958; Simmel [1903] 1971; Wirth 1938;

Park 1952), many twentieth-century urban studies failed to find compelling empirical evidence of the atomization and psychological pathologies that were expected of urban residents. In fact, the city dweller frequently seemed to be thriving in primary relationships, no worse than those with relationships in smaller rural communities (Fischer 1982; Wellman 1979; Freudenberg 1986). Other studies revealed resilience in people's ability to sustain long-distance friendships and cultivate meaningful relationships within professional affiliations (Webber 1963; Wellman 1979). Melvin Webber's famous article, "Community with Propinquity" (1963) argued that urban development led not to standardized mass society as so many feared, but allowed the emergence of a panoply of subcultures based on interest rather than place.

In all, these results have led many scholars to believe that, while communities have certainly changed in form through history, the resilience of communities proves that people still care about and are capable of fostering meaningful relationships. Communities may indeed have become more porous and loose, however, it merely indicates how people have adapted their social interactions to the demands of modern life. Robert Wuthnow (1999) argues that if newer forms of community and civic involvement continue to be blamed for contemporary social problems, the broader trends in social institutions that contribute to changes within communities and worrisome social problems will fail to be properly identified and examined. In fact, given the structural and cultural circumstances of our times, the move from stable, exclusive and place-oriented communities to porous, multiple, and lifestyle-oriented communities may actually be the key to enhancing the personal well-being of modern individuals and lead to the revitalization of public life (Wuthnow 1994).

There is no doubt that the majority of today's communities and associations scarcely resemble the ones that Tocqueville observed in his writings on American civil society and democracy. Such nineteenth-century visions of civil society traditionally assumed that the shape and practices of civil society functioned within face-to-face contexts. Rather with geographically-based, face-to-face groups becoming extinct, many of today's communities and associations are as far-flung and porous as online groups are. Consequently, as previously mentioned, some scholars defend the efficacy of online communities by arguing that they are as real as today's non-local social networks, refusing to buy into what they regard as the nostalgic myth of the warm and tightly-knit local community. But again, these assessments still rely on particular visions of communities and associations that are frequently contested. The concept of "community" that was inherited from classical sociology has, in many ways, become so brittle in the face of the modernity's new social and technological realities that it has become a term made increasingly confused and meaningless in its overuse (Brint 2001; Cerulo 1998; Calhoun 1980, 1998).

While these approaches often either assume consensus in defining "community" or merely advocate one particular vision, there is also a problematic tendency in the existing literature to discuss the relationship between online groups and democracy as if all online groups were the same. The diversity of online communities is rarely addressed, despite the fact that they vary in content and form, in ways that strongly shape their democratic potential. Few works account for the significant differences between online groups that actually exist, making systematic comparison between online groups virtually impossible. There is little language or vocabulary to even begin articulating how these groups vary. Unfortunately, without a clear basis for accounting for such variance and precisely

identifying their particular contributions to (or detractions from) democracy, the work done on online communities often resorts to anecdotally-driven or single case-based conclusions. There is great need for a systematic analysis of virtual communities that does not simply resort to pre-established conclusions.

In this chapter, I have attempted to show that in the one question, "Can online communities strengthen democracy?" there are three elements that need to be problematized: (1) what characterizes online community? (2) what sorts of associational characteristics would lead to strengthening democracy, and in the end, (3) what is considered efficacious to democracy? It is unfortunate that much of the rapidly growing literature on the Internet and democracy does not attempt to parse out and openly address these distinct issues. Rather, there is a tendency to address the first one in selective ways and then launch into a particular mode of interpretation that frequently betrays a particular ideological bent. Furthermore, largely absent is a clearly articulated account of how online social bonds function to either cultivate or erode democratic goods; how the interactions in online communities might vary according to their particular content or form; and what specific democratic goods might be directly or indirectly cultivated by online communities.

Before looking into how the "community problem" might be resolved, it might be helpful to first establish the major characteristics and dynamics of virtual communities. When we refer to virtual communities, what phenomena are we talking about? What is it that virtual communities generally consist of? What structures and components make up the topography of these groups? And, what does it *mean* to participate in or identify with a virtual community? By taking time to identify and discuss the content and character of virtual communities, the following chapter aims to ground the proceeding argument in

concrete cases to avoid becoming abstract or overly generalized in one's claims about online groups. You might say that the review of the literature adequately outlines the shapes and contours of virtual communities, but what remains is the task of adding substance, color and dimension to our understanding of these groups. Some readers may already be quite familiar with the landscape of virtual communities and may be inclined to simply move on to the analysis presented in Chapter Four. For others less familiar with the content of virtual communities, these descriptions and observations will hopefully serve to be a useful introduction to their primary components and features.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LANDSCAPE OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

There are places where people spend an extraordinary amount of time devoted to communal goods, to bringing about things that are of value to a collection of people, where they feel identified and feel like they have a role and responsibility in shaping that space. There are extraordinary collections of people who work in common on problems that they consider their problems and problems of society in general. There are these places you would recognize as communities.

- Lawrence Lessig

No longer do we, as members of the group, belong to the community, rather the community belongs to us.

-Usenet newsgroup members

As a case study for new communication technologies, the phenomenon of online communities is too varied to be considered as a whole. The term "online communities" alone is frequently used to describe not only asynchronous discussion forums, but chat rooms, newsgroups, multi-user domains, list-servs, and geographically-bounded community networks as well. It would be impossible to conduct one study and make any worthwhile claims about this wide range of disparate technologies and media ecologies. Therefore, the scope of this project has been narrowed to examine website-based online communities. These communities represent a wide array of content and form, including a diverse range of management by corporations, non-profit organizations and individuals, that have significant implications for how these groups are organized and maintained. These website-based communities are accessible to the mainstream of Internet users and high in visibility in Internet culture, making this particular type one of the best representatives of the overall trends in online communities. In addition, website-based communities share a sufficient

number of basic features that several other types of online communities possess, so that particular findings that result from this analysis may be applicable to those groups as well.¹

In this chapter, I first present the sample selection and methodology employed in this study, and then discuss the primary components of website-based communities, appraising each component with a general description of its salient characteristics and examples that highlight the ways that they shape the community's culture and members' mode of participation. One of the themes that runs through this analysis is the sustained tension in virtual communities between individual autonomy and collective solidarity, liberty and social control. The examples presented are intended to be illustrative of the typical characteristics and dynamics of online communities, and are not meant to be a systematic account of the sample.

METHODOLOGY

Thirty website-based online groups were examined for their organizational structures and features. The sample was primarily drawn from websites that have been distinguished with "Best Community" awards or nominations from Yahoo! Internet Life and the Webby Awards. In addition, websites recognized in the "Best Activism" category of the Webby Awards were included to represent one of the main areas of growth and promise for the Internet's role in democratic public life and to more directly address the issue of computer-mediated communities and civic participation.²

¹ In the rest of the dissertation, I will use the general term "online" or "virtual communities" to refer to the website-based communities I studied, unless otherwise noted.

² One of the principle criteria employed in the selection process for this sample was to only include those community websites which support and/or archive online communication between group members. Because this study is interested in the ways that online communities might cultivate democratic goods from the ways that members interact with each other, an identifiable form of interaction was necessary in each group. As a

Regarded as one of the most prestigious awards for a website to receive, the annual Webby Awards present two honors in thirty categories: The Webby Award and The People's Voice Award. The Webby Award is granted by The International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences (much like that of the Academy Awards for film). The Academy includes a wide array of members such as MIT sociologist Sherry Turkle, Internet journalist and author Howard Rheingold, Oracle chairman Larry Ellison, musician David Bowie, and writers and editors from *The New York Times*, *Wired*, and *Forbes*. Websites are evaluated according to six criteria: content, structure and navigation, visual design, functionality, interactivity, and overall experience. The People's Voice Award is determined by individual voters. The sample was drawn from the community websites that were nominated and/or awarded either the Webby Award or the People's Voice Award for Best Community or Best Activism from 1998-2004.³ For a complete list of the sample and brief description of each group, please see the Appendix.

Yahoo! Internet Life was one of the most influential monthly consumer lifestyle magazines that covered the "culture, content and community" of the Internet from 1999-2002. Published by Ziff Davis Media, it was one of the fastest-growing magazines in the history of publishing, having a circulation of 1.1 million subscriptions which was more than twice that of *Wired Magazine's*, reaching one in nine of all daily Internet users in 2001.⁴ Under the category of "Best Community," Yahoo! Internet Life gave awards for a number

result, many award-winning activism groups were not included because their websites only consisted of information and did not offer any mode of social interaction.

³ While the Webby Awards officially began in 1997, the first "Best Community" award was given in 1998 and the first "Best Activism" award in 2000.

⁴ As reported on the "Seniornet Awards and Distinctions" page. Retrieved from <http://www.seniornet.org/php/default.php?pageID=5468> on March 18, 2004.

of sub-categories including Best Spirituality Community, Best Women's Community, and Best Senior Community. The sample consists of the winners from 2000 and 2001.⁵

Having the sample be determined by those deemed best online communities by the cultural gatekeepers of the Internet, my argument is intended to function on the discursive level. My criteria for what constitutes a "virtual community" was to include any group that was referred to or awarded as such. While selection and examination of the most popular and esteemed online groups certainly is not representative of the larger universe of online communities, I argue that these groups represent the kinds of groups that Internet users value most and consider as the leaders in online community development and design. Their influence socially, culturally, and technologically is evident in the ways they are recognized in mass media and technological literature. They ostensibly embody the cutting edge of the industry and the future of online communities. Also, in examining those groups which are most admired and highly regarded, I argue that whatever is determined from these exemplary communities, the same or less can be expected of the rest of the virtual community population. Therefore, my argument about the role that virtual communities might play in the future of American public life is not based on groups that have the most activity, traffic, or membership. Rather, the significance of the sample lies in their cultural and qualitative impact.

Qualitative content analysis of these online groups followed the grounded theory approach developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967). The analysis was conducted in stages beginning in January and June 2003, with the majority of the data gathered during March 10-30, 2004. Initial open coding of online groups was performed to

⁵ These two years were the only years of awards that the Yahoo! Internet Life website reported on August 2 and September 24, 2002. The magazine has since been discontinued and the website shut down.

determine the salient differences and similarities to analyze among the communities. The following dimensions guided my examination: basic profile information of the groups; available activities, services and content; mode and process of membership; discussion forums and moderation; and institutional forms of sponsorship and management. Primary community components were identified and four models of online cultures were conceptualized according to their sponsorship and mode of participation. Then, I performed a closer analysis of the community components to ascertain the primary themes and structures of membership and community culture. The following community components were analyzed: About Us, Mission, Rules of Conduct, Terms of Service, Privacy Policy, Home page, Registration Process, Corporate Profile and Advertising pages.⁶ Last, selective coding was conducted on central themes of individualism, egalitarianism, and consumption, and community websites were re-visited to gain clarity for the systematization of online culture models and typologies.

THE TOPOGRAPHY OF THE VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

Website-based communities have evolved from the basic discussion forum or newsgroup format, where people interact with each other by posting messages on a public discussion board, to rather complex institutions whose maintenance can require an entire staff of administrators and managers. Any foray into such a community begins with the encounter with a group's home page. As the "face" of the community, the home page gives users the first impression of the identity and culture of the group. It functions as a storefront—setting out its latest and most attractive wares. This page is often organized with navigation bars

⁶ As we will see in Chapter Four, the focus of this study is the structures and forms of these online groups, not the content of conversation or discussion that takes place in the group. Therefore, archived communication between members was not systematically examined.

running across the top, bottom and sides, with featured articles, services, or activities centered on the screen. In very small print along the bottom of the page is usually information about the company managing the website community, the webmaster, and the community's years of operation. From the home page, users can click on links that connect them to a mostly standardized set of pages and components: About Us, Rules of Conduct, Membership Registration, Discussion Forums, FAQ, Privacy Policy, and Terms of Service.

About Us: In 93.3% of the sampled groups, an "About Us" page offers an overview of the community and its purposes.⁷ Like a brochure, this page often gives a brief articulation of the background history and philosophy of the online community. At times, it also has information about the organization or corporation that manages or sponsors the community. Part of or linked to the About Us page is often a Mission statement that concisely articulates the goals and aspirations of the group. Most mission statements are brief descriptions of the group's theme or purpose as illustrated by the following examples:

- "the world's largest destination for chat, personals, health information, news and entertainment for the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual community" (*Gay.com*);
- "source of user-generated buying advice for outdoor sporting goods" (*MTBR*); and
- "a community of older adults who are interested in exploring the uses of computer and communication technologies to enrich their own lives and contribute to others." (*Seniornet*)

A brief survey of the groups' missions shows that virtual communities are most often explicitly oriented towards satisfying the needs and desires of individuals whether as a source of information or sociability. Some mission statements express the type of social experience they hope to offer members:

- *Kuro5hin* identifies itself not only as "a collaborative site about technology and culture, both separately and in their interaction," but also "a community of people who like to think. This

⁷ *TalkCity* and *Kuro5hin* had information about the group under their Standards and FAQ page respectively.

is a site for people who want to discuss the world they live in. It's a site for people who are on the ground in the modern world, and who sometimes look around and wonder what they have wrought. It's also a site for people who want to discuss the world and also a site for people who need a laugh now and then."

- The forums at *Café Utne* hope to be a place "where great conversation is the norm and everybody knows your name."
- In *Bianca*, "The shack is not just a place to visit, it is a place to create, it is a place to breathe, it is a mood, a feeling that is hard to find among the whirling electrons of the web."
- *The Well* is "a cluster of electronic villages on the Net, inhabited by people from all over the world" to be compared to "hanging out in a village square, corner bar, classroom, or a group of travel companions."

One of the more thorough statements of purpose is found in the group *Beliefnet*.

We are a multi-faith e-community designed to *help you meet your own religious and spiritual needs*—in an interesting, captivating and engaging way.

We are independent. We are not affiliated with a particular religion or spiritual movement. *We are not out to convert you to a particular approach, but rather to help you find your own. Fundamental to our mission is a deep respect for a wide variety of faiths and traditions.*

We try to achieve our mission by providing information and inspiration...[and] spiritual tools such as prayer circles, kits to help you celebrate [births, anniversaries]...Most important, we help you to learn from each other through a breathtaking array of discussion and dialogue groups.

That's what makes Beliefnet unique. We're all about helping you find your way.

- from "About Beliefnet" page (emphases mine)

While this statement establishes *Beliefnet* as a community that exists principally to fulfill the spiritual and religious needs of its readers and customers, a striking characteristic of this statement is its effort to set itself apart as an alternative option to more traditional religious institutions. The assumption is that its independence from any such connection to a pre-existing faith tradition or institution guarantees an environment free from coercion, proselytizing, and ultimately *disrespect* for people's individual spiritual convictions. Determined to appeal to the individual seeker who is generally at odds with the dynamics of conventional religious forums, *Beliefnet* distances itself from organized religious institutions

and identifies itself as an uniquely open and non-coercive environment of spiritual exploration.

This effort to serve as an alternative option to traditional authorities is echoed by many online communities who are committed to resisting or remaining independent from conventional institutions of power. These groups tend to situate the locus of agency and action in the individual member, rather than an external authority or even the community itself. The following examples illustrate how online communities define themselves as being free from the influences of government, corporate, political, or religious interests (emphases added):

- Action without Borders, the organization that founded and operates *Idealist.org* states that it is “*independent of any government, political ideology or religious creed*. Our work is guided by the common desire of our members and supporters to find practical solutions to social and environmental problems, in a spirit of generosity and mutual respect.”
- *Alternet* is an “online magazine and information resource where pressing issues are subject to examination and debate,” offering an “*alternative view of current events; alternative to corporate conglomerates that dominate media marketplace*.”
- *Craigslist* aspires to “provid[e] *an alternative to impersonal big-media sites*.”
- *Burningman* is an “annual experiment in temporary community *dedicated to radical self-expression and radical self-reliance... There are no rules about how one must behave or express one's self at this event* (save the rules that serve to protect the health, safety, and experience of the community at large); rather it is up to each participant to decide how they will contribute and what they will give to this community.”
- “What we buy, eat and use to fuel our homes and cars have a giant impact, not just a personal one. *We can't keep feeding the beast, the heavily subsidized industries destructive to the well being of Mother Earth....*The beast also controls politicians and mainstream media. *VoiceYourself* shares the news they didn't see fit to print.”

Virtual communities take seriously the positioning of the individual as the primary unit of the community and conscientiously express a commitment to the intrinsic worth of individual contribution in their About Us page. In one-fifth of the groups sampled, there is an explicit reference to promoting egalitarian and inclusive participation. Interrelated is an emphasis on free speech, an attribute regarded by several groups (13.3%) as the key to fostering “lively discussion” or “lively debate.” The basic values stated below from the

"About Us" page of MTBR, a website for mountain biking enthusiasts, most thoroughly communicates these priorities:

- We believe everyone has something to contribute.
- We believe that an open, honest and respectful environment can generate stimulating discussion and valuable contributions from all of our members.
- A healthy community has room for and encourages participation from everyone, regardless of their age, background or level of expertise.⁸

Other examples of such commitment to inclusive participation include (emphases added):

- "Fray is a community. We are people who have come together around the idea that everyone has a story to tell. Ordinary people who tell extraordinary true stories. And *we believe that everyone has a story to tell.*"
- *Craigslist* is about "*being inclusive, giving voice to disenfranchised, democratizing...*"
- In *Burningman*, "*Everyone is capable of contributing positively* to the community, and a variety of viewpoints are both expected and encouraged."
- *FictionAlley's* "founding mods (sic) desired a community in which *no person would be unreasonably censored or senselessly banned* in a place where people could state their ideas and engage in spirited and thought-provoking debates, discussions, and analysis."

The discourse of egalitarian and inclusive participation is sometimes reinforced by the availability of discussion forums dedicated to allowing members to communicate feedback and grievances. Forums for discussing community concerns with fellow members were found in 20% of the groups,⁹ and forums for feedback or grievances to the community administrators exist in 30% of the groups. Individuals are invited to contribute their opinions to the management and purposes of the community:

- "Through our discussion area and feedback opportunities, *we hope to give our online community a meaningful voice in the ongoing evolution of AlterNet.org* and to strengthen the insight that springs from meaningful dialogue among peers."
- "We promise to bring passion to our work and to our community and to act with affection and appreciation for our members. *We will listen to your suggestions and complaints, and try to incorporate your ideas in everything we do.*" (*iVillage*)

⁸ It is interesting to find that a virtual community mainly devoted to trading consumer information about specialty items would find it so important to affirm a non-coercive setting that encourages self-initiation and freedom of expression.

⁹ *Beliefnet* strives to evoke a particular nostalgic communal sensibility by calling their forum for grievances, "Town Meeting."

As we will see later, the value of encouraging active participation and involvement is taken even further beyond the level of rhetoric in the virtual groups built upon an open-source system,¹⁰ where content is collaboratively derived and managed by the community members themselves.

In all, by promoting inclusive and egalitarian participation, these groups implicitly critique the traditional face-to-face communities as being hierarchical social structures where individuals may be marginalized or silenced, and access to the offices of power limited or altogether nonexistent. In contrast, virtual communities conceive of themselves as offering individuals a social setting that protects and supports their personal authenticity. In giving individuals opportunities to voice their opinions and thoughts, the context of computer-mediated communication is believed to make possible the countercultural ideals of flattening social hierarchies and eliminating forms of prejudice and discrimination. In addition, the easy intimacy and familiarity that often develops in online interactions reinforce a culture of informality that resists the conventions of decorum. Therefore, while they may draw on romanticized notions of warm and affectionate face-to-face interactions, for the most part, virtual communities imagine themselves to be a better alternative to the constraints of conventional communities. In this way, the About Us pages of many virtual communities are not only statements about what type of social setting they are striving to achieve, but also normative statements about how communities ought to be.

¹⁰ Open source systems are based on software whose source code is publicly available and free of charge. The logic of open source is that programmers can collectively read, redistribute, and modify the source code, as a result producing better software than the traditional closed models that keep the access to the source code limited.

Member Registration: As virtual communities are committed to privileging the rights and autonomy of its members, it is not surprising to find that joining a group is as easy as filling out and submitting an electronic registration form. While becoming a member is usually not necessary for enjoying the main features of most online groups, approximately 87% of the communities require registration for either access or posting-rights in its discussion forums. In the groups that do not require membership and permit individuals to post messages anonymously, membership is highly encouraged and expected of anyone who wants to be regarded as a legitimate member of the group.

The process of registration is hardly stringent, and usually requiring an exceedingly low degree of self-disclosure to become a member. In fact, in almost two-thirds of the sampled groups, the only information that is required is a name, username and valid email address. The remaining third requests additional information such as zip code, date of birth and gender. Only in two groups, *The Well* and *Café Utne*, are the use of real names strongly encouraged in discussion forums, and only *The Well* requires a street address and telephone number in the registration form. The table below shows how, for the most part, very little information is required for officially joining a virtual community.

FREQUENCY OF REQUIRED REGISTRATION INFORMATION ¹¹

<i>Required Information</i>	TOTAL	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Name	17	56.7%
Username and Password	23	76.7%
Email Address	29	96.7%
Street Address	1	3.3%
Zip Code	9	30%
Country	7	23.3%
Birth date	9	30%
Telephone	1	3.3%
Billing Information	1	3.3%
Sex/Gender	8	26.7%

In half of the sampled groups, registering members are expected to state their birth date or confirm that they are over the age of 13 or 18. This corresponds with the fact that 40% of the groups require members to be over 13 years old, and 10% required them to be at least 18 years old. While virtual communities with adult-oriented content and discussion commonly exclude minors, the 2000 Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) has had the effect of extending age restrictions in virtual communities to the age of thirteen. In an effort

¹¹ This analysis did not include Bianca.com because registration was temporarily shut down and access to the registration page closed.

to protect children from being targeted online with marketing techniques that collect their personal information, COPPA protects the privacy of children under the age of thirteen by requiring the request of parental consent for the collection or use of any personal information of the under-aged users. Because the requirements for regulating information collection from children below the age of thirteen are so strict, many online communities simply seek to exclude such membership.¹² However, because the Internet has no natural social boundaries or direct means of checking the validity of people's age claims, the actual regulation and restriction of minors is naturally quite difficult.

The low entry costs that virtual communities maintain with regards to the quality and quantity of information required of registering members is reinforced by the fact that membership in the majority of groups is free of charge. Only eight groups (26.7%) have a monetary fee connected to membership. *The Well* and *Bianca* are the only two communities that require a fee for membership. Other groups that charge subscription fees offer an option of membership that is free, either on a trial basis or as a limited form of membership. The most expensive membership fees belong to *The Well* charging \$10 and \$15 per month. More moderately priced are groups like *Bianca* and *LiveJournal* that charge \$10 - \$30 per year, *Kuro5hin* and *DelphiForums* which charge from \$2 - \$5 per month, and *Slashdot* which creatively charges \$5 per 1000 pages viewed. On *TalkCity*, basic membership costs approximately \$8 per year, while owning and running one's own discussion forum costs \$50 per year.

If entry costs such as monetary fees and required information are supposed to function as barriers to entry, it is interesting to find that neither of these requirements seem

¹² Only one of these websites attempts to deal with the inherent enforcement problems in computer-mediated communication by requiring written permission from parents to be physically submitted.

to have any efficacy on limiting or controlling membership enrollment. Several communities that have memberships in the millions (e.g., *Gay.com* claims 8.5 million members, *iVillage* 11.4 million, *ThirdAge* 1.5 million), ask members for their full name, email address, and demographic information. Groups that charge fees for membership such as *DelphiForums*, *TalkCity* and *LiveJournal* still have memberships in the millions. In contrast, many of the smaller groups (e.g., *Burningman* has 3,000 members and *VoiceYourself* 1,100 members) do not require fees and do not ask for anything but email and username. These observations suggest that the continued ubiquity of registration processes in virtual communities have little to do with boundary maintenance. Rather it points to the way that the information itself is being used for tracking or marketing purposes—a significant point of consideration to be further explored in Chapter Five.

The trouble with these membership numbers, of course, is that there is no way to verify how many of those registered are still active members. In all the communities, there are no obvious ways to remove oneself as a member in any of these groups. Nevertheless, even if official membership is relatively meaningless or temporary, the numbers of those who do choose to go through the process of registering is often still dwarfed by the number of people who simply use the online community and the services it offers without registering. In *Idealist.org*, while there are 9931 registered members, this is compared to the over 183,000 individuals who have entered their employment database; *MTBR* has 900 members, but receives 30,000 unique visits daily; *LiveJournal* maintains 2.6 million total registered blogs, with half of them being active, but only 6645 members registered in the forums. These ratios suggest that most people do not become members and still succeed in achieving or acquiring what they want from their involvement with the community as

visitors, guests, or users. Membership, therefore, is minimally conceived and sustained in virtual communities.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ): The Frequently Asked Questions page commonly referred to as the “FAQ” is present in 83% of the sampled communities. The FAQ lays out in question-and-answer format information about the community, with a majority of its content devoted to explaining the mechanics of posting messages, managing accounts and profiles, and other forms of participation. The structure of the FAQ page is similar to a typical “Help” feature found in most computer software programs. Individuals are expected to take the initiative in seeking out answers to their questions. In fact, it is standard protocol for new members to be expected to have familiarized themselves with the content of the FAQ. This is such common knowledge in cyberculture that should a newcomer pose a question in a discussion forum that is already addressed in the FAQ, they are perceived (and sometimes reprimanded) for being irresponsible and rude for taking up bandwidth and people’s time with a redundant inquiry.

One of the most important features that the FAQ explains is how to use the filtering tools. These technical features enable individual members to selectively filter out postings or communication from undesirable members of the community and efficiently control their communication circles by setting up “friends” or “buddy” lists, along with “ignore” or “foe” lists. In the sample, almost one-quarter of the groups had filtering tools. While these tools protect members from having to deal with the harassment of trolls or suspicious individuals, they also open the way for members to have unprecedented control over their

entire experience of the community.¹³ Furthering the degree of individual power that members are given to determine who they encounter in the community, *DelphiForums* allows individuals to start private forums that are “everything you need to create an environment that’s all your own but available to anyone you choose.”¹⁴ In this way, the control that individuals are given in virtual communities through institutional features heighten the freedoms and license already granted in these computer-mediated settings.

Rules of Conduct: While the discourse, organization and tools of virtual communities seem to advance the ideals of personal autonomy, the actual day-to-day maintenance of these groups is commonly guided by a clearly articulated system of norms and rules. Two-thirds of the sampled groups have a page dedicated to the rules and guidelines of conduct expected of members.¹⁵

One of the earliest set of community guidelines in cyberspace was developed in *The Well's* website. What began as a few sentences on how members ought to conduct themselves in discussion forums now has expanded to an entire statement of philosophy and set of rules to which new members are required to consent:

¹³ The logic of managing one’s social interaction is carried out further in *Slashdot* and *Kuro5bin* which permit members to determine what thresholds of information they would like to receive. A member with a threshold of 1 will receive *all* the postings and comments that are submitted, while a member with a threshold of 5 is only exposed to articles and comments that have been significantly filtered and moderated. These filtering mechanisms help users sort through large amounts of information according to the settings they prefer. While exceedingly efficient in sorting through a potential deluge of postings, Cass Sunstein warns about the consequences of political polarization when people are given the capacity to essentially read only articles that fit within their pre-selected criteria.

¹⁴ Quoted from the “About DelphiForums” page, retrieved from <http://www.delphiforums.com/aboutforums.htm> on June 17, 2004.

¹⁵ Of the ten groups that did not have a separate page of rules, half addressed issues of acceptable conduct in their Terms of Service statement or FAQ page.

The WELL Community has existed with minimal rules and strong peer culture since 1985. This online community has been influential in setting standards for other systems as well as evolving its own policies in a free-ranging debate over the years.

Traditionally, this motto and the short paragraph of explanation has been the cornerstone of WELL policy: You own your own words. This means that you are responsible for the words that you post on the WELL and that reproduction of those words without your permission in any medium outside of the WELL's conferencing system may be challenged by you, the author. ...

The WELL, as a community, functions on mutual respect and cooperation. Computer conferencing is quite different from face-to-face communication. Only your words travel over the phone lines -- the facial expressions, tones of voice, and other nuances we use in live conversations are completely absent from discussions on The WELL. Please pay careful attention to how you use those words. Sarcasm and humor, for example, often don't travel well -- that's why people sometimes use symbols such as: :-) (look at it sideways) when they want others to know a statement is meant to be humorous.

Remember that words you enter in a burst of inspired passion or indignant anger will be there for you (and everyone) to read long after your intense feelings are gone. This isn't meant to discourage spontaneity and the expression of feelings on The WELL, but merely to remind you of the long-term existence and effects of what you write.

You may, from time to time, find yourself in disagreement with someone on The WELL. At times like this, please remember that it's safer, more polite, and more persuasive to take issue with that person's comments, rather than attacking them personally.

People on The WELL generally avoid "obscene" language (no, we aren't going to try to define that here), except in conferences where such language is acceptable -- or even encouraged. There are no rigid rules about this. Just remember that we are a diverse community of individuals with varying standards, and there may be minors present.

Naturally, passwords for The WELL and other systems, credit card numbers, or other information that was gained or can be used illegally are not allowed on The WELL.

You are encouraged to make full use of the WELLcome and Test conferences during your first days on The WELL. Please don't leave requests for help in every conference you enter. The WELLcome conference ([g_wellcome](#)) is for asking questions; the Test conference ([g_test](#)) is for practice.

Posting of a single item to multiple topics around The WELL is considered impolite, especially when done within a single conference. Within any given conference, it pays to keep in mind that anyone who may be interested in your comment is probably reading most of the topics where you might post it. So, posting it once should be enough. If you aren't sure which topic would be most appropriate, feel free to ask the conference host(s) where they think would be best.

If your posting is of interest to several conferences, (perhaps both pets and wildlife), and merits a topic to itself, The WELL supports something called "linked topics" -- the same topic appears in multiple conferences. If you'd like to start a linked topic, ask the conference hosts.

If you have any question on what's appropriate in a particular conference, just ask the host(s). They'll be glad to help you out.

As a forerunner in the shaping of online community culture, *The Well's* policies of expected behavior focus on the responsibilities of membership—from treatment of other members, proper use of discussion forums, to personal accountability for one's words. The purpose is not only to alert participants to the ways that computer mediation radically increases the salience and impact of one's posted words, but also to encourage participants to be efficient in what they say, and *how* and *where* they post their communications in order to keep a well-run set of discussion forums. Priding itself in being a community of "minimal rules and strong peer culture," and having shaped its rules through years of "free-ranging debate" among its members, the culture of *The Well* demands of its members virtues of personal responsibility, thoughtfulness in posting messages, and self-control. For the most part, these guidelines are meant to function like the rules of etiquette; there is the unspoken expectation that transgressing these rules will not necessarily warrant being forced or asked to leave the community, but indications of social disapproval will likely be expressed. If an individual hastily attacks another member verbally in an argument, their behavior may warrant being publicly and privately reprimanded. If an individual repeatedly attacks anyone they interact with, or is posting private information about other members, it is more likely that they will be asked to leave the community and their membership accounts terminated. Since these rules of conduct do not lay out a system of penalties, they merely set out the parameters of acceptable behavior. In surveying the rules of conduct that virtual communities have, one finds a remarkable amount of homogeneity considering the wide range of groups that exist.

Though it may seem contradictory to find a set of coercive rules in a social context that so values individual autonomy, the rules of conduct are often referred to and framed as a necessary ingredient to forming a healthy environment in which every individual can thrive

and meet their needs. For, in addition to the communal challenges faced within any diversely populated setting, these virtual communities must deal with the additional license that can be taken in computer-mediated communication where individuals are less constrained by social mores and authority, and the community faces possible risks of slipping into a chaotic free-for-all. Consequently, in one-third of the groups analyzed, the discourse of *respect* is summoned up as members are requested to be "courteous" to each other and "respect" those of differing backgrounds. Groups repeatedly ask members to be "open" to each other's opinions and hope that the forums will be environments of "civility." In *Alternet*, they assure members that "The founding premise of the AlterNet Discussion Forums is that it is to be a safe, intelligent, harassment-free environment in which a variety of people can come in, talk, listen, have fun, teach, and learn." At the same time, the priority of respect is offset by a commitment to free speech. In *TalkCity's* Rules of Conduct, it states that "[member's] right to speak freely here must be exercised with courtesy and self-restraint." *Beliefnet* states that it is "committed to protecting a high level of freedom of expression, and to maintaining a welcoming and safe community in which that expression can flourish." Their members are especially called to exercise virtues of respect and tolerance in the contexts of discussing potentially volatile topics. Hoping to maintain a comfortable public space for those coming from different spiritual and religious backgrounds, *Beliefnet* requests that members refrain from hate speech, advocacy of violence, proselytizing, and vulgarity.

The appeal to "respect" is particularly acute within groups which serve individuals of socially-marginalized or sensitive status. *Gay.com* states that its discussion forums are "committed to nurturing a respectful, fun, and lawful environment where lively discussions of LGBT issues are celebrated and honored, and where appropriate action can be taken

against reported violations of this safe haven." In the community guidelines, one of the first encouragements is:

Don't be Afraid. Gay.com is a community dedicated to providing a conversational safe haven—an online world where you can openly discuss the LGBT issues important to you. If you are new to the community, posting to a board or speaking up in a chat room may be a scary proposition. But try it out. We encourage you to jump into the conversations and see what a friendly welcome you receive.

In this potentially charged and vulnerable social context, the language of "respect" is paired with the group's assurance that their forums are "safe" environments. Similarly, *iVillage's* "Community Covenant" promises to "provide a safe, well-lighted place where members are encouraged to treat each other with respect and affection."

As much as these rules attempt to place boundaries of acceptable behavior, there is often a tendency for online groups to be apologetic about even having to institute such rules. More often than not, in their attempt to negotiate the tension between promoting autonomy and maintaining social control, they end up hoping for an organic peer culture of conflict resolution and mutual sanction. In fact, when it comes to enforcement of these rules, some online communities remind members that the communities are ultimately subject to the making of its members and thus, they ought to police themselves. The following statement from *Alternet* illustrates how some groups try to cultivate a culture of self-sanction rather than rely on the bureaucracy of rules:

In any such gathering of diverse minds there is bound to be disagreement....Some other forums on the Internet have become virtual battlegrounds and are very unfriendly places to be. We do not want that to happen at the AlterNet Discussion Forums, but neither do we want to create a lot of hard and fast rules. We think most of the people who come into the AlterNet Discussion Forums are friendly, intelligent, compassionate, and understanding enough to be self-policing in this area. Getting out of hand, aggressive, and abusive does us all a disservice.

Similarly, the virtual community *Bianca* appeals to an ethic of personal responsibility and mutual tolerance:

If you find something within Bianca's that you consider offensive, contact the person responsible for posting the material and bring it up with them. Please do not contact Bianca, as she has no responsibility over the vast majority of this site's content. Bianca is merely a conduit for the existence of an online community with persons like yourself that are responsible for its content.

You see, this is a community site. In fact, this is YOUR community site! BiancaTroll is only here to provide you with a place to interact with each other in a shared environment, and to make sure the site is physically running smoothly. We are not your parents, police, or your baby sitters, we are more like your landlords. We provide the space and you fill it up. What you fill it with is up to you. Now, if the floorboards are broken or something else in the physical place is askew, like any good landlord, we will fix it, in due time :). However, if your roommates are bothering you, that problem is between you and them!

The statement from the *ACLU* website further illustrates the tension that communities face between expressing the threat of external enforcement and the hopeful expectation of mature personal responsibility:

This is a free speech forum. It is not without rules and regulations or supervision, but it is considerably less regulated than most message boards. If you find that disturbing, you may want to find a more regulated environment.

Violations to the rules could result in an email warning sent to the address used when registering for the forums and/or the removal of the offending post. In extreme situations, no warning will be issued and posting rights will be terminated. Repeat violations or ignored warnings may result in the loss of a poster's privilege and their entire email address blocked without further notice.

There are civil and criminal laws against certain forms of speech like libel, defamation of character, harassment and threats. It is the prerogative of any poster who feels any laws have been violated to pursue legal action. Posters are responsible for what they post, and should realize there may be serious consequences for illegal behavior.

As we have seen, the rules of conduct in virtual communities work in tension with the discourse of free expression and personal autonomy promoted in other facets of the community. On the one hand, there is an attempt to diminish the perception that the community exists under a gridwork of rules. The exhortation to "police yourselves" appeals to the countercultural ideal of self-governance as the administrators of virtual communities try to "stay below the surface" as much as possible, stepping in to intervene only when necessary. Despite the necessary existence of guidelines and rules, there is an overarching

sense that the autonomy of members in their discussions and social interactions be preserved. On the other hand, the rules are also presented in a manner to suggest a sense of security against the chaotic environment that the Internet and cyberspace can be. The individual is viewed as an agent capable of “policing themselves” in one instance, and vulnerable prey to hostility in another.

Hosts and Moderators: The capacity for individuals to be self-reliant and responsible for their words and actions online is both most needed and most tested in times of conflict. The vision of respectful and courteous discussion where every member feels welcome and empowered to voice their opinions sounds wonderful as long as everyone sufficiently abides by the community guidelines and shares the same sense of responsibility and expectation about what civility looks like. More often than not, even in the most carefully fashioned and intentionally structured groups, differences among members—whether they be ideological, demographic, or personal—are likely to arise. What happens then? How are virtual communities prepared to deal with the sorts of problems that inevitably arise when individuals are given as much free reign as they are and the invitation for “lively debate” becomes an excuse for mud-slinging and incivility?

The standard impression that virtual communities are settings in which individual can simply get away with saying anything is gradually becoming outdated as monitoring and moderation of discussion forums is increasingly established as a common practice. In the sample, 86.7% of the groups have forums hosted and moderated by either volunteer community members or professional staff members. Like the rules of conduct, community moderation is cast as two very different types of responsibilities. The first form views

community hosting as the “heart and soul” of a successful and effective online community. It is likened to “online innkeeping...mak[ing] a sense of context and ‘place’ worth coming back to again and again.”¹⁶ Community hosts are essentially the “human touch” in an otherwise non-embodied, often asynchronous exchange of electronic messages. An expert in online community-building Steve Silberman (1997) writes:

The binding force of a community can't be bought with code, or programmed in with bots. Human hosts respond to users' questions and demands, and will tell you more about how your side is doing than any server log. They also recruit new users, by recognizing potential members and drawing them in. Most importantly, they set the tone of interaction, and teach community values by example. Miller and Thau [founders of Bianca] say they built the Shack with the intention of ‘making a place on the Web to tell people how we live our lives, with love, energy, and community.’ As lofty as that sounds, Miller and Thau embody the values they espouse. They're nonjudgmental, authentic, and playfully curious about the wonders that arise daily in the place they've built with the biancanauts. Wherever you look, you'll find communities crystallizing around people who possess—at least while they're online—the same qualities of engaged, tolerant openness.

Because hosts ostensibly set the tone of the community, the particular qualities that the hosts possess are crucial. “A good party depends a significant amount on who's there when each guest arrives, so you will want to steadily build the sensation of having interesting people ‘already there’ from the moment you open, usually starting with your own scintillating participation as the reason to visit” (Williams 1999). At the same time, like any savvy party host, letting guests run with a particular conversation and helping everyone share the limelight is part of the vision as well.

Hosts particularly are responsible for taking care of new members. In the sample, 26.7% of the communities have a forum devoted to welcoming and introducing newcomers to the rest of the community. As new members are invited to introduce themselves to the rest of the community, community hosts are expected to welcome them and address any

¹⁶ Quoted from “Notes on using and hosting conferences” page. Retrieved from <http://www.well.com/confsteam/> on March 19, 2004.

questions that a new member may have. In this capacity, the role of the host institutionalizes the implicit expectation that long-time members be “good neighbors” and assist the unseasoned new members.

The other side of community hosting, however, includes responsibilities of surveillance such as making sure discussions stay on-topic, monitoring and enforcing guidelines in the forums, handling conflicts between members, and advising staff on issues and policies affecting the overall website community. (These roles tend to be referred to as “moderating,” rather than hosting.) Moderators usually have technical capacities to edit or delete posts; to move, close or delete topics; and to suspend or terminate accounts when a member has egregiously transgressed the given rules. Moderators aid community administrators in enforcing the caveat that practically every online community maintains in its discussion forums:

We do not and cannot review all content posted by viewers on the web site, and we are not responsible for such content. However, we do reserve the right to delete or edit any reviews or other postings that are not, in our sole discretion, in the spirit of these basic values. We will monitor posting activity of anyone who violates the following guidelines and, if necessary, restrict their ability to post reviews or messages on the site (*MTBR* website).

This statement carefully allows the community to monitor, but maintains its own lack of culpability should an offensive message be posted.

While the majority of groups rely on paid staff members to function as moderators, almost a quarter of the sampled groups encourage members of the community to become volunteer hosts or moderators. Volunteer moderators are often selected for their regular participation and active membership in a particular forum, their knowledge of a topic, their helpfulness to other members, and a history of positive contributions to the community. The process of becoming a moderator ranges from submitting an electronic application that

states their qualifications and reasons for wanting to be a community host or moderator, completing an online tutorial on hosting, to being nominated by other members as is the case in *Seniornet*.

Community moderation is an aspect of virtual communities that administrators self-consciously work at making acceptable and even desirable to members. Some groups which rely on more hands-on monitoring and moderation justify their practices by evoking the poor quality of discourse found in "other public discussion boards." The extreme quantities of spam and trolling found in Usenet newsgroups and others are raised as examples of what happens in groups without moderation. The statement in the *Geocaching* forum guidelines illustrates this tactic (emphases added):

There are certain guidelines you should be aware of before you post messages to this Discussion Forum. It is important that there are some basic guidelines of conduct. While most people are courteous and polite; there are some individuals that choose to behave in a disrespectful and irresponsible manner. *Unlike other public discussion boards, Groundspeak [the forum host] will take appropriate steps to keep our discussion in line with these guidelines and with good taste.* In general we will leave it to you the community, to police yourselves. Treat others with respect. Remember that this is a public venue read by many people spanning all walks of life.

Other groups seek to avoid the feeling of coercion that often comes with external surveillance by encouraging the development of community leaders and volunteer moderators. These groups rely on the dynamics of peer pressure to guide the content and tone of the community. While deviant behavior may ultimately be tempered and controlled through technical mechanisms wielded by website administrators, for the most part, these groups seek to make social code the key to a group's success and congeniality.

Terms of Service and Privacy Policy: Users and members alike are subject to legal responsibilities and rules articulated in the Terms of Service and Privacy Policy statements

present in virtually every website community.¹⁷ Most generally, the Terms of Service outlines the responsibilities that the community website provider has to its users and group members, and the responsibilities that members have to the community website and their fellow members. It explicitly articulates key policies such as how the website and its producers are not obligated, but maintain the right to monitor the postings in message boards and act accordingly when deviant behavior is found. In addition to statements establishing the limited liability of these groups, standard behaviors that are prohibited include: posting spam, copyright infringement, impersonating any person or entity, sending computer viruses and other interference to the network, and submitting false information for registration. Among other things, users agree to refrain from postings that are harmful or harassing to others, unlawful, vulgar or obscene, advocate violence, disclose personal information about someone else without their permission, or advertise services or products. These statements not only communicate the legal commitments and caveats that any user of the website ostensibly agrees to accept, but also articulates how users are expected to conduct themselves in the website.

In cases in which members fail to comply to the Terms of Service, most groups reserve the right to terminate individual accounts. There are a few cases where other systems of sanction are instituted. *FictionAlley*, for example, employs membership suspension based on a point system. Should an individual post a message that violates the Terms of Service, they would receive a warning or a point. If they accrue three points within a two-month period, posting rights of the user are suspended for one week, with following suspensions

¹⁷ Exceptions include: *Wikipedia* which has a GNU General Public License which assures freedom to copy content and redistribute with or without modifying; and *Idealist.org*, the only group with neither a Privacy Policy or Terms of Service. Three groups had a copyright policy rather than user agreement (*Café Utne*, *Alternet*, *Greenpeace*) and *Nervousness*' Terms of Service concerned the hobby of sending land mail objects itself rather than participation within the discussion forums or use of its website.

doubling in length. An even more unusual case is found in the community *Craigslist* which states that it will monetarily penalize individuals for violating its Terms of Service. Members agree to pay \$25 for sending spam, \$100 for posting a message when your account has been previously terminated, and \$1000 for impersonating or falsely misrepresenting one's affiliation with another person!

Often presented as fine print, or in all capital lettering, these Terms of Service statements are often visually unreadable and written in legal jargon. How seriously a group really means for its users and members to be aware of and abide by these terms is questionable. Few websites make a point to notify users and members of the need to become familiar with these Terms. Only four groups from the sample required individuals to consent to the Terms of Service in the registration process. The lack of user-friendliness in their presentation suggests that enforcement is less of a concern compared to the community provider's desire to preemptively protect itself should disgruntled or wronged users or members seek litigation.

Similarly, the purpose of a group's Privacy Policy is to disclose how and what information is collected and used by the website or community provider. Usually explaining that the information submitted during registration is collected to customize and personalize member services and experiences, the Policy assures users that personally unique information is not sold, rented, or traded, but aggregated information may be given to business partners or used to make the website "more responsive to user needs." In addition to information that is directly submitted on the website, these online groups also collect information given off by each member's cookies, indicating browser type and IP address.

While the majority of Privacy Policies simply present their information collection practices, a notable minority of communities make a concerted effort to tell users to express how they do *not* use member information for marketing purposes. For example, *Friendster* states that they will not expose members to spam or sell their email addresses. *Seniornet* assures members that they not only refuse to sell address lists to third parties, but also refrain from monitoring, tracking or recording any user actions, and that any information posted by users will only be used for other purposes when consent is given. This type of Privacy Policy reflects the alternative ethic that continues to inform some virtual communities and their practices, even as the Internet becomes increasingly commercialized as we will further explore in Chapter Five.

* * *

The general picture of virtual communities then is one of conflicting dynamics. Though the culture of virtual communities seeks to meet the needs of the individual and their rights, many of its components appear to work against the prevailing discourse that valorizes radical choice and autonomy. Ironically, the culture of self-expression and egalitarianism is maintained by a system of monitoring and moderation of discussions. Groups like *The Well*, which retain a reputation for their countercultural roots and ideals, are the very ones that implement some of the highest barriers to entry and most constraining structures that discourage anonymity and require accountability. For all their rhetorical commitment to the ideals of altruism and common decency, the actual practice of building and sustaining online communities relies on a fair degree of social control and constraints. Lest one begin to think that virtual communities are authoritarian settings, they are far from it for the balance between autonomy and control persistently tilts towards autonomy as computer mediation

frees the individual from any efficacious form of sanction. While every word spoken and every action taken by members might be monitored and subject to legal scrutiny, the distance inherent in computer-mediated communication still favors the freedoms of cyberspace. For example, there remains little or no way of checking the validity of the information submitted during registration. Nor is it easy for community administrators or moderators to continually police user accounts to make sure that members have not created multiple personas. Ultimately, online communities are technologically equipped and institutionally configured in such a way that makes computer-mediated identity evasive and enforcement of rules difficult.

While virtual communities might be broadly characterized by these dynamics, the balance between autonomy and control can vary enormously according to the design and purposes of a community. A group that invites and expects its members to contribute their own articles and writing will yield very different communal dynamics from another group that mainly functions to disseminate information to its members. To begin to parse out some of these defining differences among online communities, I suggest that there are four identifiable models of online communities that express and institutionalize distinct visions of membership, and thus have varying propensities towards enhancing public life.

FOUR MODELS OF ONLINE GROUP CULTURES

Virtual communities can be broadly categorized into the following four models of online group cultures: (1) niche service, (2) clearinghouse, (3) visionary communal, and (4) technical interface. The determination of categories was based on identifying differences in the dominant modes of membership and community purpose. For that reason, for example,

while *Craigslist* often functions as a service for online classified advertising (and thus seems more like a technical interface model,) its noted discussion forums and strong communal mission qualifies the group as a visionary communal model. While these four models sometimes do overlap, their differences are similar to the differences one might identify between a lifestyle enclave, a hobby-focused club, a commune, and a student union. When you consider the practically incomparable differences between these conventional offline groups, it becomes clear how those online communities might have very different functions and degrees of political efficacy as well.

**DISTRIBUTION OF WEBSITE-BASED ONLINE COMMUNITIES
ACCORDING TO ONLINE GROUP CULTURE MODEL**

	N	Percentage of Sampled Groups %
NICHE SERVICE <i>Beliefnet, BET.com, iVillage, ThirdAge, Seniornet, Gay.com</i>	6	20%
VISIONARY COMMUNAL Discussion Forums <i>Bianca, Café Utne, The Well, Craigslist</i>	4	13.4%
Open Source <i>Kuro5hin, Slashdot, Wikipedia</i>	3	10%
(TOTAL)	(7)	(23.3%)
CLEARINGHOUSE Activism <i>ACLU, Alternet, Greenpeace, VoiceYourself, Idealist.org</i>	5	16.7%
Activity/Hobby <i>Burningman, Geocaching, Nervousness, FictionAlley, MTBR, Fray</i>	6	20%
(TOTAL)	(11)	(36.7%)
TECHNICAL INTERFACE Traditional Forums <i>DelphiForums, TalkCity, ICQ</i>	3	10%
Networking/Blogging <i>Friendster, LiveJournal, Meetup.com</i>	3	10%
(TOTAL)	(6)	(20.0%)
TOTAL	30	100%

(1) Niche Service Model of Community

In the sample, 20% of the websites were categorized as a niche service community. This model of online community is targeted at a particular demographic group, whether it be by age, gender, race, topic or activity of interest. These groups offer a wide range of discussion forums that fall under a common set of lifestyle-oriented categories: health, culture, politics, entertainment, spirituality, relationships, family, travel, finance, debate, and support. Their forums occur exclusively online, keeping most relationships and interactions in the realm of cyberspace. Often, hundreds of topical forums exist alongside articles, games, shopping, and members' websites so that participation in the community can involve a great many things apart from engaging in social interactions with other members. Operated and managed by a professional staff, these groups employ a "one-stop shopping" strategy to individuals providing a wide range of activities, services, and opportunities on one site.

In its electronic medium, niche service communities resemble cable television stations. Many of these communities such as *BET.com* and *iVillage* are in fact online media outlets. However, because website-based communities remain primarily a text-based media, their very appearance is reminiscent of niche magazines. Their home pages imitate the splashy covers or table of contents of lifestyle magazines; and as such, they are examples of how much virtual communities have appropriated pre-existing cultural forms of information and adapted them for their groups. It is easy to see how the familiarity of the layout of a magazine cover enables users to easily navigate the community and signals to them what content they might expect to find.

The comparison to niche magazines is even more appropriate when considering the matter of membership in the niche service model, for they generally foster a weak sense of

membership. Users can often access the majority of the website content without becoming an official member, much like a consumer's capacity to purchase a magazine from the magazine stand without ordering a subscription (or, even more appropriately, as is now common practice, to browse through one at a Barnes and Noble bookstore for free). Users usually have all the same forms of access, privilege, and responsibility of an officially registered member, with the exception of posting messages on the forums. For those who do become registered members, their relationship with the community is guided by a subscription model, where their fundamental mode of engagement with the content of the community's forums and activities is as a consumer. While these groups are primarily designed to bring together people of particular social identities or interests, we will see in the next chapter that the majority of niche service communities are corporately sponsored and thus introduce an economic reality to the basic social constitution of these groups that profoundly impacts their experience and organization.

(2) Visionary Communal Model of Community

Twenty-three percent (23.3%) of the sample were website communities that are envisioned to be a unique social entity bound by a thick culture. They focus primarily on building a collective online identity and culture, which then may ebb into offline meetings to enhance what exists online (rather than the other way around, as we will see is the case for most clearinghouse models). These visionary communal groups divide into two sub-categories: the first set are primarily devoted to forming a distinctive social entity online. These groups possess a primary desire to bring people together in lively conversation. The discussion

forums are the community's sole feature, and to participate in the community means only to post within its forums. There are no articles, entertainment, or other services for members.

Consisting of a variety of topic-oriented discussion forums, these groups strive to be an entity whose whole is greater than its parts. While the forums may divide participants according to demographics or topics of interest within the group, the communities are intentionally structured to build a foundational base of committed participants, in the hopes of developing honest and authentic interactions. A quintessential example is *The Well*. Boasting a core group of loyal members, these groups usually employ discourse that is more personal or informal in tone. While informal social hierarchy is common among virtual communities, they are especially salient in visionary communal groups that foster strong peer cultures. New members are expected to watch and listen for a respectable period of time before jumping into the fray, and regular members are invited to become community hosts or moderators.

In order to maintain the integrity of the group's stronger boundaries, the requirements for becoming a member in these groups are stricter, demanding more information and accountability. In many instances, members are required to use real names in their posts. Registration is even closed off a period of time in these visionary communities because they had either reached a maximum number of participants or were suspending the registration process in order to resolve internal conflicts. In contrast to free membership available in all the niche service and clearinghouse models, four of the seven visionary communal groups charge monetary fees to participate.

The second sub-category of this visionary communal model consists of groups that are based on open source projects. These communities are configured so that the

contributions of members involve not merely posting messages to discussion forums, but actually collaboratively constructing the content of the website itself. While *Kuro5hin* and *Slashdot* could be categorized as niche service communities because their sites specifically target information technology professionals, they are better categorized as visionary communal groups because of the strong role that members are given through the open source software, arguably increasing their commitment and involvement. Expectations that members will not only want to read the articles, but contribute and respond to them as well, is built into elaborate systems of comments and ratings. Such commitment dovetails the underlying assumptions in the open source movement that the more people contribute, the higher the quality of work. Along with trusting that this meritocratic “invisible hand” maintains quality control, the groups very intentionally seek to inculcate the democratic virtue of inclusive participation by reiterating, as *Kuro5hin* does in its Mission page, that the group “relies on its readers—it exists for you and through you.”

The most radical and new form of this sort of collaborative participation is seen in *Wikipedia*, a website devoted to assembling a world-wide “open-content” encyclopedia. Not only is the entire encyclopedia’s content dependent on the particular contributions of members around the world, but it is constantly under revision as participants work together in editing and refining the submissions through consensus. Expectations of intensive participation and the resulting social hierarchies that develop within a collaboratively produced website community work together to create an environment where the importance of fostering a good reputation and offering quality work function to indirectly bind members more securely to the group.

However, despite the attempts to cultivate strong commitment, the ease of entry and the evolving nature of the Internet continually make it difficult to maintain social control. As the online group *Slashdot* found, "One of the unfortunate side-effects of the increasing popularity of Slashdot is that the number of trolls, flame-warriors and all-around lamers increase as well..."¹⁸ The problem of disruptive individuals becomes especially troublesome in these groups in which membership grants significant degrees of power in the everyday maintenance of the community. For example, *Kuro5hin* faced the problem of individuals setting up multiple false accounts in order to either sabotage another member's submission by "flooding" the ratings system with low ratings, or promoting their own submission with high ratings. The founder and head administrator of *Kuro5hin* wondered out loud: "how do we make it more difficult for obnoxious people to disrupt the site, without barring the gates altogether? And from a wider view, how can a large community like this continue to grow in an organic way?"¹⁹ He lamented the diminishing sense of community that the group underwent as members increasingly joined "through a google search" rather than by word of mouth. The problems reached such a level that the registration process in *Kuro5hin* was completely overhauled to require sponsorship by a pre-existing member, with the clause that if a new member gets kicked off the site for unruly behavior, their sponsor does too. This decision to structure an accountability mechanism into the registration process of the organization was a real concession for a community that sought to function on the basis of trust, altruism and common decency.

¹⁸ Quoted from the *Slashdot* FAQ page. Retrieved from http://slashdot.org/faq/com_mod.shtml#cm600 on July 15, 2004.

¹⁹ Quoted from message posted by Rusty. Retrieved from <http://www.kuro5hin.org/story/2004/3/24/0502/96199> on March 25, 2004.

(3) Clearinghouse Model of Community

The clearinghouse model of online communities was found to constitute 36.7% of the sample. These communities tend to have home pages that resemble organizational newsletters. Identifying themselves as an "information resource" (*Alternet*) or "communication hub" (*VoiceYourself*), they are frequently updated with the latest news, articles, and developments within an organization or cause, and often offer practical information about membership involvement. The discussions that occur in these groups primarily serve to provide practical information for individuals, rather than a unique social space to cultivate a distinctive social experience. Clearinghouse groups host a relatively small number of discussion forums solely focused on topics relevant to the activity or cause, with an occasional forum especially designated for social purposes. For example, the *ACLU* website hosts 14 forums that are all themed around their core concerns in church and state issues, civil liberties, judicial and legal concerns, and legislation. On *Alternet*, one of its thirteen groups is referred to as the "social hub of our community" where members can discuss matters that are considered "off-topic."

Almost half the groups that adopt the clearinghouse model are groups that foster a political form of activism or movement. The activist groups are often online extensions of pre-existing offline organizations or activities. Registered members can interact with others already involved in the movement through online forums; these exchanges are usually informational and transactional, concerning causes or movements that are occurring in "real life." It is noteworthy that the About Us or Mission pages of these communities sometimes describe the activity or parent organization itself, not the online community. For example, *Idealist.org* is a project of the organization Action without Borders which, as the Mission page

states, “connects people, organizations and resources to help build a world where all people can live free and dignified lives.”

The other half of the clearinghouse models includes groups that support recreational activities or hobbies. While *Burningman* uses their web community much like a newsletter that helps to organize and continue communication throughout the year in support of their annual festival, *Geocaching* and *Nervousness* rely heavily on their online communities to logistically carry out their offline activities. Consider how *Nervousness*, a group that supports land mail experiments—where participants exchange or pass along art objects such as notebooks or mix tapes—innovatively uses its discussion forums as the primary screening mechanism for individuals interested in participating in the actual offline activity itself. In addition, a discussion section devoted to “Member Issues” has an AWOL section where members search for other members, and another forum that amasses postings from members who are going to be “on leave.” Since these forums are the only site in which the participants can communicate and interact as a collective whole, the virtual community is essential to the activity.

As the table below indicates, with 60% of the sampled groups operated by for-profit companies and 33.3% run by non-profit organizations, the clearinghouse model of communities make up a significant number of those groups stemming from the non-profit sector. Many of these groups advance causes or activities that are resistant to the dominant systems of power, and thus embody an alternative culture in the way the community is run. Their Terms of Service and Privacy Policy tend to be actively geared towards protecting the rights of the individual, rather than being legally-oriented towards protecting the parent

organization (as is commonly found among niche service communities and other commercially-sponsored groups).

CROSSTAB OF ORGANIZATIONAL STATUS AND MODEL TYPE

<i>Model Type</i>	Niche Service	Visional Communal	Clearinghouse	Technical Interface	TOTAL	Percentage of Sampled Groups
Community Provider						
For-Profit	6	5	1	6	18	60%
Nonprofit	1	3	6	0	10	33.3%
Independent	0	0	2	0	2	6.7%
<i>TOTAL</i>	7	8	9	6	30	<i>100%</i>

(4) Technical Interface Model of Community

Among the websites that have been recognized for effective and innovative forms of online community were various technical interfaces. These accounted for 20% of the sample and fell into two categories: traditional forms of discussion forum interfaces and innovative networking/blogging technologies. The more traditional interfaces in the sample—including *ICQ*, *TalkCity* and *DelphiForums*—support networks of member-managed discussion forums, functioning much like the widely-known portals such as Yahoo! Groups and AOL discussion forums. The websites simply provide the technical tools and server space for individuals to form their own discussion groups. These discussion forums often will have their own mission statements or stated themes that provide the boundaries of discussion.

Essentially community infrastructure services, these technical interface models provide platforms not only for discussion forums, but also include chat groups, instant messaging, and other networking capacities. Their home pages have little content or graphics and are mainly an index of links to forums and services. Membership is often available to individual users in a variety of packages. A free mode of membership gives members a basic set of customizing tools and forum access, while several paid levels of membership are graded to grant varying degrees of ad-free interactions or access to more exclusive forums.

The second category of technical interface groups support web-based interactivity and collaboration. These include *Meetup*, *LiveJournal*, and *Friendster*, all of which have received much media attention for changing the ways that people socialize. *Meetup* and *Friendster* online services are tools for networking through private electronic communication or actually gathering together at a pre-arranged time and place. *LiveJournal* supports online blogging. These virtual communities rely on innovative software that encourage an overlap of online and offline connections. As I will explore further in the following section, these new structures of interaction and relations are very different from that of traditional discussion forums. Overall, technical interface models suggest a relatively weak view of community. They frequently conflate what it means to be a technological platform with being a “community.” This is clearly illustrated in *ICQ*’s self-description as the “world’s leading communications community,” with a mission to “provide the world with the quickest, richest and most lovable communication tool” and offer “individuals and groups around the world with the most complete means to find each other and communicate better.”²⁰

²⁰ Quoted from the “About the ICQ Community” page. Retrieved from <http://company.icq.com/info/community.html> on March 24, 2004.

THE EVOLUTION OF COMMUNITY

In 1994, the Internet was best represented by such iconic sites as Amazon.com and Etoys, and brimming with the promise of electronic voting and downloadable e-books. Now ten years later, Amazon is considered a success simply for surviving and actually turning a profit, Etoys has been relegated to the cemetery of defunct e-commerce ventures, and the latest buzz surrounds terms like wi-fi and blogs. As the rapidly changing nature of the Internet is followed by new generations of users, software designers and administrators, it is not surprisingly to find new forms of online communities as well. While the four online culture models are reasonably distributed throughout the sample, observing how they are distributed through time shows that particular models are increasingly more prominent than others, and that the trends in online communities and their users is a clearly evolving one. Because these different types of online communities have the potential to foster varying modes of membership and cultures of commitment, identifying these changes is another important piece of the puzzle for understanding the democratic potential of virtual communities. In this section, I examine the changing nature of online communities by comparing eleven groups that were selected as winners of "Best Community" Webby Awards from 1998 to 2004.²¹

²¹ There are two winners each year: one is the People's Voice winner and the other is the Webby Award winner.

**DISTRIBUTION OF WEBBY WINNERS 1998-2004
ACCORDING TO MODEL TYPE**

<i>Model Type</i> <i>Year</i>	Niche Service	Visionary Communal	Clearinghouse	Technical Interface
1998		The Well		
1999	Seniornet iVillage			
2000	Café Utne	Slashdot		
2001		Craigslist		
2002			Idealist	
2003			Geocaching	Meetup
2004			FictionAlley	LiveJournal

The distribution of the winning groups shows them to be loosely clustered into two distinct periods: from 1998 – 2001 and 2002 – 2004. In the first period, the groups from 1998 – 2001 fall under the niche service or visionary communal categories. Among these relatively bounded groups, *The Well* and *Café Utne* have some of the strongest requirements for membership according to any virtual community standard, and *Seniornet* and *iVillage* are designed to be all-encompassing in offering a complete array of information, discussions, services and activities for their target audience. There is not only a shared sense of group identity, but also an ethos or culture of expectation regarding what it means to be an active, engaged member. Furthermore, an ideal about “community” and “lively conversation” animates each group. This is evident even in the names of each community as they to evoke images of cafes, villages, and enclosed spaces like wells and nets. *Slashdot*, the one group that does not have a name that clearly refers to a nostalgic ideal of community, most intentionally

builds into its community design a system of collaborative contributions from its members. In 2001, *Craigslist* appropriately represents a pivot year. On the one hand, the website is thickly conceived by its owner and founder, Craig Newmark, to be a gathering place for people from a given metropolitan area and its discussion forums remain one of the primary reasons why members are involved in the *Craigslist* community. On the other hand, it serves non-social instrumental ends as it lists local classified advertisements.

In the second period from 2002 – 2004, the groups are organized either according to the clearinghouse or technical interface model. Notably, none of these groups exist solely in cyberspace, but each has direct impact on an offline reality. *Idealist.org* and *Geocaching* are respectively organized around the non-profit world and an offline sporting activity. Of all these groups, *Meetup.com* relies most on the Internet as an instrumental tool for organizing offline gatherings of various interests and affiliations. The more instrumental the use of the Internet, the weaker the sense of internal communal boundaries. Instead, these virtual communities increasingly use the Internet to help people connect in offline settings and realities.

In the final year 2004, it is possible that a third period is beginning as the two groups *FictionAlley* and *LiveJournal* primarily involve content creation. *FictionAlley* collects fan-based amateur fiction, and *LiveJournal* functions as an online diary system for individuals. *LiveJournal* is similar to weblog communities that allow individuals to post their writing online and receive comments by others, but tends to support postings that are more personal in nature. With the submission of personal or fictive writing as the primary activity for members, these communities take a step away from the original notion of computer-mediated virtual community transcending the limitations of face-to-face communication, and instead focus

on capitalizing on the text-oriented nature of the Internet. The Internet is used more as a publishing tool, functioning like a traditional mass media with the addition of an active feedback mechanism.

Overall, the trend in Webby Awards through the last seven years have seen the niche service and visionary communal models of online groups give way to clearinghouse and technical interface models of groups. (In the table, this is represented by the cluster of winning online communities moving from the upper left hand corner down to the lower right hand corner.) This development suggests several significant changes in the use of the Internet for sociability. First, there is a shift away from thickly-conceived communities whose main feature involved hosting an expansive field of discussion forums. In these earlier online groups, the group was essentially a public space dedicated to the general ideal of cultivating interesting conversations and debate. These groups aspired to be virtual spaces in which individuals would “hang out” and discover an alternative to traditional public spaces. A significant part of the appeal was the capacity for these online communities to foster social interaction among strangers through computer mediation. The latent hope was always that friendships and meaningful relationships might grow from these otherwise unlikely encounters—across time zones, states and even countries. While social gatherings sometimes occurred peripherally offline, the bulk of community life in these groups existed in cyberspace. Since 2001, online communities have become not only more narrowly-oriented, but are increasingly designed to straddle online and offline activity. The Internet is used increasingly as a tool for organizing offline activity rather than a means of carrying on conversation or social interactions in cyberspace. This shift confirms Haythornthwaite and Wellman’s (2003) observation that the Internet is increasingly integrated within existing

offline practices and social relationships, rather than creating a “reality” that is completely separate and removed from offline life.

Second, while the cultures of online communities generally have privileged the individual user (as we have seen earlier in this chapter), the evolution of these groups has revealed a continuous tipping of the balance so that individual identity increasingly supersedes group identity. This is especially evident in the communities that support content creation as a major part of participation and membership.²² In these newer groups, participation does not primarily involve posting messages to an ongoing conversation, rather it is through submitting essays or fiction that people comment on. While older groups like *Slashdot* certainly had opportunities for members to publish their writings, they were meant to contribute to the communal discussion rather than the individual and their particular network of readers as is found in *LiveJournal* or *FictionAlley*. For in *LiveJournal*, individuals do not submit entries and postings to a public forum that an entire community is expected to read. Rather, the online diary system is structured with each user at the center of a network of readers. Individual members are given the technical means to selectively manage who has access to their diary entry. Entries and posts can be set as “public,” allowing anyone with a browser to read them; “private,” allowing only the author to read them; or “friends-lock,” allowing only those designated as “friends” access. (Similarly, in *Friendster*, profile information can either be selectively accessible to designated social contacts or open to the entire Friendster network.) While participants often use *LiveJournal* as a way to provide

²² Though content creation is a growing area on the Internet, posting written materials is still a relatively minor activity. A recent Pew Internet & American Life survey (2004) reports that 17% of adult Internet users (those 18 and over) have posted written materials on Web sites. Their surveys have found that between 2% and 7% of adult Internet users have created diaries or blogs. 11% have actually read other people’s blogs or diaries, and about a third of these blog visitors have left comments. The survey also finds that people with high household incomes (\$75,000+) and educational attainment (college degree and above) are most likely to create content. This is troublesome if virtual communities increasingly require content creation as it naturally selects out the type of people who will likely participate.

personal updates to a wide range of friends and family, various forms of filters can also be set up to create set lists of friends for specific posts, even strategically dividing up communication to family members and friends. The powerful features that individuals have to enhance their autonomy essentially change the dynamics of the group so drastically that social control within the group is determined by the individual.

While filtering mechanisms also exist in more bounded groups such as *The Well* or *Café Utne*, online community expert Lori Kendall (2003) suggests that the effects of the filtering mechanisms are different within these newer groups that lack the sense of shared community and expectation for active participation that were common to the bounded groups. She notes how users do not tend to post as often as one would find in an ongoing discussion forum, and as a result, communication tends to imitate other forms of written communication, rather than face-to-face oral communication. As a result, Kendall finds among her *LiveJournal* interviewees a common frustration over the lack of comments from readers; they desire to know that people are interested in them and are reading their posts. In this sense, each person's journal becomes a discussion forum in itself, with each individual as a community host anxious for readers and participants to discuss not merely any generic topic, but most likely the topic of themselves. Curiously, these newer online groups that ostensibly encourage more active forms of participation and a stronger sense of group commitment actually end up reinforcing the self, not merely *over* the community, but as the very driving force and purpose of the community.

Third, the more recent virtual communities are not structured as a unitary space for interactions and activities, but are more accurately described as networks or mobilizing agents. For instance, *Meetup.com* facilitates many different gatherings, but does not bring

together or conceive of a group of people considered "members of *Meetup*." The fact that 1.1 million people have signed up for Meetups, while *Meetup.com* has only 669 members in its discussion forums indicates that membership is essentially about membership within a network, not the group itself.

Similarly, *LiveJournal* holds together millions of online journals. Kendall notes how *LiveJournal* has become countless overlapping networks of authors and readers, where users often read and comment on each other's journals. According to a 2004 Pew study on content creation, while 56% of blog readers visit diaries of friends and 25% go to family blogs, 46% have visited blogs of strangers. Kendall (2003) describes these communities as "a collection of interlinked but individually-controlled forums" where "conversations occur linked to a particular post within a particular person's journal." As such, these online communities affirm the identity of the individual over and against the community, so that what is significant to the individual is not the online group *LiveJournal* itself, but rather the network of readers that view and respond to their entrees. Epitomizing what Barry Wellman (2003) termed "networked individualism," *LiveJournal* represents a shift altogether in conception of "community" from bounded groups to loose shifting networks, from shared identity and space to clusters around the individual. While Wellman calls on software designers to take into account the shift to loose social networks in the broader social landscape, I would emphasize the ways in which online communities are not merely reproducing the networked individualism that exists in the broader culture, but augmenting the process through its very design and organization.

In this analysis of virtual communities through the last seven years, we find that online communities are not as focused on developing communal identity and participation.

Rather than creating social conditions that purposefully work towards cultivating dispositions of shared responsibility and identity, the new generation of virtual communities looks more like institutions that support a public and social forum for the self. This trend dovetails the dynamics that we saw earlier in the analysis of community components. In the balance between protecting individual autonomy and enforcing social control, the structural features of online communities—in their content and form—generally tend towards privileging the needs and rights of the individual member. All in all, the discourse analysis of community components and comparison of groups through time suggest that online communities may not be the catalyst for civic participation that many have hoped. However, to make such a claim requires a stronger basis for determining the relationship between the groups' characteristics and democratic efficacy. In the next chapter, I will suggest that political theorist Mark E. Warren offers a promising conceptual framework of associations that can be used to systematically analyze online communities and begin to bring clarity and order to the virtual community terrain.

CHAPTER FOUR

AN ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

What kind of culture would enable a community to maintain both a shared commitment to the public good and a dedication to empower its members with a lot of individual autonomy?

-Paul Lichterman

In Chapter Two, I argued that, rather than clarifying how online communities might foster social bonds that help or hinder American public life, assessments often end up merely reflecting longstanding differences between liberals and communitarians about the true nature of “community.” In Chapter Three, the components of virtual communities were examined to establish what it means to participate in a virtual community and how they are organized and maintained. This chapter aims to offer an alternative framework for analyzing online communities that provides terms with which one can more precisely discuss and evaluate online groups and their democratic efficacy.

While significant portions of the sociological and political traditions of theorizing community have viewed community as a type construct, there have been attempts to reach more analytical and conceptual clarity. Durkheim laid the foundation by suggesting that community be conceived not as a static social structure or physical entity that occupies territorial space, but rather as a set of variable properties of human interaction that are equally identifiable in relationships found in small village settings and that of the modern urban metropolis (Brint 2001). A recent example of this type of conceptualization is found in the work of sociologists Karen Cerulo and Janet Ruane (1998). They generate six new taxonomies of social relations which occur both online and offline, varying in degrees of intimacy and superficiality, collaboration and information exchange, personal-focus and

public-oriented. Steven Brint (2001) reconceptualizes community with a new typology based on structurally distinct subtypes of community and variables such as context of interaction, motivation for interaction, frequency of interaction, location of members, and amount of face-to-face interaction. Such efforts to create a set of generalizations about human social organization can be exceedingly helpful in the study of online communities.

However, it is important to keep in mind that the general preoccupation with the “community” problem can be misleading in its assumption about the relationship between social solidarity and the capacity to cultivate a vibrant civic culture (Calhoun 1998). For involvement in a community is not the same as involvement in public life, though it is certainly a key component of it. One might say that stable and binding communities are necessary but not sufficient for promoting personal involvement in local and broader political concerns, informal deliberations and information exchange. They foster public spaces and associational affiliations that may not be wholly public in their nature. As Calhoun (1998) asserts,

community strength and local involvement...do not constitute adequate bases for democracy. Democracy must depend also on the kind of public life (that is) not...the direct extension of communal bonds, but...the outgrowth of social practices which continually brought different sorts of people into contact with each other and which gave them adequate bases for understanding each other and managing boundary-crossing relations.

He continues: “This is in part a cultural issue, but one with crucial social structural foundations and one linked importantly to information technology” (p. 391).

While the rhetorical appeal of restoring communal life remains compelling, albeit underspecified, assumptions are often made about the role that associations play in democracies. For example, Robert Putnam’s conclusions about declining social capital can be taken to simply suggest that increased numbers of associations and membership will

automatically benefit democratic practices. Many are eager to simply reinvent Tocqueville's eighteenth-century civil society in contemporary American public life. However, thoughtful observers, such as Adam Seligman, wonder if modern understandings of autonomy, the individual, and personal identity have changed so much that they fundamentally redefine and reshape the content of solidarity and the collective, rendering the original vision of civil society beyond recognition. In fact, many political scholars have called for a re-evaluation of the common assumption that associations themselves will automatically promote civic goods and virtues (Rosenblum 1996; Kaufman 2002; Gutmann 1998). They point out that some associations can be coercive and undermine powers of deliberation or voting, and even secretive and conspiratorial in their culture. Apart from associations that are characterized by ostensibly anti-democratic features, even those associations that clearly are oriented towards democratic ends and public goods may have latent effects that erode the foundations of a robust public life and democracy. Associations can unintentionally "transform pluralism into parochialism...breed[ing] intolerance that carries over into political life" (Warren 2001, p. 11).

Theda Skocpol (1999) offers a historical account of the fundamental shift that occurred in the organizational style and quality of American associational life to create "associations without members." Prior to the sixties, traditional associations had "combined social or ritual activities with community service, mutual aide, and involvement in national affairs" (p. 66). Mirroring the organization of political parties, these membership federations had a structure of elected officials and delegates that ran from the national level down to the state and local levels. The terrain changed with the growth of grassroots social movements and protests, allowing the inclusion of new voices into the civic realm. However, the

evolution of associational life during the sixties also coincided with the inception of professionally-led advocacy. Since then, organizations have been heavily centralized, bureaucratized, and increasingly focused on lobbying efforts. No longer run by a multi-tiered complex of volunteers, participation in these associations mainly rely on direct mail and modern mass recruitment methods. While the new structure of associations continues to boast large membership rosters, Skocpol points out that processes of rationalization have gradually cut out the human scale of interaction, changing not only what it means to be a member, but also influencing and altering the aims and missions of organizations. Putnam (2000) gives a similar account of the changes in associational life by distinguishing between the primary associations of families and friends; the secondary associations of local civic, religious or sport groups; and the tertiary associations of interest groups and professional advocacy organizations. He laments the increase in the tertiary forms of civic involvement that are relatively weak and often solely consist of annual monetary contributions. In this way, Skocpol and Putnam join other scholars in questioning whether contemporary forms of associations prevent America from "becoming a country of detached spectators" (Skocpol 1999).

In his book *Democracy and Association* (2001), Mark E. Warren presents a theory of associations that functions as a critique of the assumption that all associations are good for democracy. While this assumption undergirds much of the literature surrounding the recent revival of interest in civil society, what often remains underdeveloped and unarticulated is a clear sense of what exactly associations are expected to do for democracy, why particular functions or effects ought to be expected from associations, and how such functions or effects might vary according to an association's particular content or form. Warren

problematizes the tendency to assume that all associations function in the same way and proposes a conceptual framework that takes into account the fact that all associations are not equal in structure. Instead, he suggests that it is in identifying their very differences in structure and purpose that an association's particular contribution to democracy can be located.

In this way, Warren's conceptual framework for associations can provide a basis for understanding and articulating the ways in which all online communities are not the same. As evident in the four models of online cultures presented in Chapter Three, there is a great need for clear delineation between the wide variety of groups that exists. One of the most obvious differences is the distinction between those groups which are entirely Internet-based communities and those which correspond to a geographically-bounded space or another organizational sphere from which members can relate. While Internet-based groups do not exist in the "real world" and thus are easily joined and left, others are extensions of actual organizations or social movements that may have other forms of traction that bind its participants. As we have seen, online communities also range widely in the content of their discussion, the practices that constitute normal participation, and the structures that guide and shape the types of interactions that take place. They vary from being issue-oriented (i.e., political, social, or cultural), recreation-oriented, to identity- and support-oriented. In each type of online community, there are different expectations about how one manages identity, how intimate and personal interactions ought to become, and how opinions ought to be expressed.

The Pew Internet and American Life 2001 study of online communities provided a useful level of specificity in its report on how online group participation varied according to

the types of groups. The most common form of participation was found among online trade associations or professional groups (50%) and groups for people who share a hobby or interest (50%). Almost one-third of online group participants reported to be involved in sports and entertainment fan groups, lifestyle groups, medical or personal support groups, and local community groups (28-31%). Belief groups, political groups, religious organizations, and online hubs for local sports teams were visited and joined by approximately 20-24%, and ethnic or cultural groups were found to be frequented by 15% of the study's participants.¹ Because a wide variety of organizations and structures exist under this umbrella term of "online community," it sometimes becomes problematic when scholars extrapolate findings from a single online group to make conclusions about online communities in general. Therefore, in order to give a more precise statement about online communities, it is necessary to account for this variance.

Warren's framework of associational features can also help to develop a portrait of the structural features in virtual communities that might influence the types of democratic effects they have. He introduces categorical distinctions that highlight how different purposes of groups will elicit different forms of interactions and expectations among participants and members. What features most shape the experience of those involved in virtual communities? How does the vision of the founders, organizers, or producers of these groups shape the interactions that occur? How are the effects of anonymity and choice negotiated within the group's structural features? Using Warren's conceptual framework, these questions can be approached to illuminate not only how virtual communities are

¹ While these groups vary greatly between those which are oriented towards establishing personal relationships or simply providing information, it is interesting to note that overall, participants are more likely to be male, younger in age, college educated, and experienced users of the Internet.

comparable to other conventional offline groups, but also how they are distinct and varied among themselves.

CONCEPTUALIZING ASSOCIATIONS

Warren's framework primarily consists of two sets of typologies. He begins by distinguishing between three types of democratic functions or "effects" that associations can have on democratic practice: developmental, public sphere, and institutional. First, *developmental effects* socialize individuals in the capacities and dispositions necessary for active citizenship. For example, one of the developmental effects involves the cultivation of civic virtues such as mutual trust, reciprocity and recognition. Associations, in this sense, are "schools of democracy" which help individuals to think and act for the common good. Second, *public sphere effects* contribute to the formation of public spaces where public agendas, deliberations and opinions are collectively formed and expressed. An important example is the public representation of differences necessary for an egalitarian and diverse forum of deliberation. Lastly, *institutional effects* support the translation of public judgments into collective decisions through the organizational political process. These effects include underwriting avenues for expressing grievances and efficacy in exercising resistance.

These three categories alone are helpful in clarifying what is meant when an online group is deemed democratic or not. As previously mentioned, the study of the Internet and democracy is complicated even further by the failure to separate out the ways in which the Internet has distinct roles in disseminating information, hosting communication and associational interaction, and enhancing the means of governance. Too often, scholars make claims about the Internet without clarifying the different types of democratic effects the

technology might have.² Warren's typology of democratic effects immediately helps in demanding precision about whether a claim concerns matters of civic virtues, representation, or political processes.

These democratic effects, Warren argues, vary according to the different characteristics possessed by associations. Thus, it is a specific constellation of associational features that explain why belonging to a fraternal order may be useful in cultivating civic virtues of high trust and commitment, (both of which are strong developmental effects,) but are equally likely to cultivate exclusive and homogenous interactions, (amounting to poor public sphere effects.) Likewise, particular associational dimensions explain why an online discussion forum devoted to debating the abortion issue may be very efficacious in developing people's social and cognitive skills in public deliberation, but weak in fostering affective ties. In this sense, the question for Warren is not whether an association is good or bad for democracy, but rather, what specific democratic goods does an association tend to cultivate?

Warren's second set of typologies concerns the ways that associations vary in structure and purpose. He offers three general criteria for distinctions: (1) ease of exit, (2) constitutive media, and (3) constitutive purpose. First, concerning ease of exit, Warren asserts that while the general virtue of associational life largely rests on the voluntary nature of group formation and participation, ease of exit can still vary greatly. Questions might include: how difficult is it to leave the group? What is the geographic proximity between members? How often do they meet? What level of commitment is expected of group

² A rare case in which the differences are clearly made is Kamarck and Nye's book *Democracy.com* (1999). The issue of democracy is divided into four categories: (1) Representation: ideas, advocacy, deliberation, social movements; (2) Civic Virtues: community, social capital, civil society, association life; (3) Politicking: campaigns, voting, elections, information; and (4) Bureaucracy: the state and its various governing arms.

members? And what are acceptable forms of participation? Consider how membership in the local PTA group and the national Sierra Club are both voluntary, but ease of exit varies greatly because of differences in geographic proximity between group members and mode of participation (i.e., compare the involvement of attending local meetings regularly to writing a check annually). Drawing from Albert O. Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1971), Warren argues that ease of exit impacts the given experience of conflict resolution, often influencing whether a member will engage conflicts internally by giving voice to their grievances, or respond to conflicts externally by leaving the group. In cases of associations with lower ease of exit, therefore, there are more chances for the cultivation of commitment, trust, deliberative skills and cooperation. In cases of higher ease of exit (where the exit costs are relatively low), market-like mechanisms and behaviors tend to creep into associational life, so that pressures are exerted on associations through members' choices to stay or move on as they prefer. Thus, the significance of a group's ease of exit is its potential impact on its members' capacity to learn habits of conflict resolution and negotiating differences.

Second, Warren understands associations and their relations to be conceived and maintained through different forms of structures—what he calls “constitutive media” or “media embeddedness”—which impact how associations operate, make decisions, negotiate conflicts and differences, and pursue their goals. Groups primarily held together through *social media* are embedded in communication, social norms and solidarity. These groups—sports clubs, hobby groups, cultural and religious groups—are “cultural and social in nature, and their general effect is to reproduce or alter cultural systems” (p. 111). Groups embedded in *financial and economic mechanisms, or political and legal concerns* include political interest groups, think tanks, consumer groups, and unions. While certain associations (such

as support groups) operate only through social media, others (such as professional trade or occupational associations) may combine social with economic concerns. Warren holds that the differences in constitutive media are most pronounced between groups held together by social media and those working to leverage political or economic power. Because political and financial demands are often perceived to be less personal, associations of that nature often have a higher capacity to absorb conflict and sustain productive debate through institutionalized processes and norms. In contrast, groups embedded in social media tend to be less deliberative and more homogenous because the stakes for affective solidarity and identity maintenance are higher and more fragile.

Last, associations vary according to their constitutive purposes or intended goals. Warren argues that the identity and function of associations are defined by the following categories of goods and purposes: status goods, interpersonal identity goods, individual material goods, exclusive group identity goods, inclusive social goods, and public material goods. Depending on the nature of the desired purpose of a group, associations will tend to cultivate particular democratic effects over others. In general, it follows that groups with purposes that are inclusive, social and public will contribute more broadly to democratic functions than those that are oriented towards ends that are exclusive, individual, and private. For example, associations seeking public material goods, such as civic groups that work towards water conservation or air pollution control, are expected to yield many democratic effects (i.e., requiring cooperation and consensus building); while associations geared towards status goods such as gated communities or elite sporting clubs support the least, being unlikely to contribute to public life and tending to generate trust that is only limited to those of similar status. Warren reiterates that these goods are in no way predictive

of the democratic effects that particular associations will have, but that their outcomes are still highly dependent on the varying degrees of ease of exit and media embeddedness.

Overall, these associational distinctions amount to a conceptual framework that highlights the fact that particular *democratic effects are produced by specific associational features*. With this logic, Warren need not rely on contentious claims about the inherent virtues of associations or get bogged down in a battle over the nature of “authentic” communities. Rather, he can identify the specific mechanisms in associational life that enhance or detract from civic engagement. In fact, Warren’s vision of a robust associational life recognizes that associations can contribute to democratic governance in ways that are both highly pluralized and even contradictory. He argues that the basis of a healthy civic culture is not simply more associations or more participation, but a *balanced ecology of associations* where an inevitable series of trade-offs between various associations and their democratic effects can take place.

Additionally, his scope of the associational terrain for democracy is a wide enough lens that not only includes those associations that are specifically assembled for political purposes, but encompasses those associations that are “merely” social or economic. As Tocqueville and others have insisted, even those non-politically oriented associations can function to produce unintended or latent by-products that will contribute to democratic vitality or not. This broad theory of associations allows the conceptualization of online communities to continue to be open-ended and not confined to fitting a particular mold. Furthermore, what Warren’s conceptual framework suggests for analyzing online communities is the importance of considering how the democratic effects of online groups might fit within the overall landscape of associations and communities, and the necessity of taking into account the significant variance that exists among online communities

themselves. In sum, Warren's theory of associations encourages us to ask: (1) Where do online communities fit in relation to conventional associations? (2) How do they vary in associational features among themselves? (3) What sorts of democratic goods might be expected from them? The following section addresses each of these questions through the typologizing of online communities according to Warren's associational features. The determination of these associational features involved an evaluation of not only mechanical characteristics and explicit factors, but also implicit expectations and meanings. What does it *mean* to participate in or identify with a virtual community? What quality of commitment is encouraged by the existing organizational structures and norms? Therefore, determining ease of exit required more than merely looking at geographic proximity or frequency of contact, but included examining the level of commitment expected of members, and forms of participation considered acceptable. Similarly, identifying the constitutive media of a group demanded moving beyond the discursive level presented by a group, and more deeply examining the particular culture of a group and the meaning of membership. The criteria for constitutive goods also called for more than an analysis of manifest goals and orientations, but involved having a clear sense of how the culture of a group intentionally and unintentionally forms its members and their experiences of the community.

THE VIRTUAL TERRAIN OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Applying Warren's three categories of distinction for typologizing associations, the online communities were found to be entities that tend to facilitate high exit, hold together through social media, and promote exclusive group identity goods (See table below for results).³

³ A preliminary analysis of virtual communities was performed on a sub-sample to determine how much Warren's typology of associational features could be productively used as a framework for understanding online

**DISTRIBUTION OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES
ACCORDING TO ASSOCIATIONAL FEATURES**

Associational Feature	N	Percentage of Sampled Groups %
EASE OF EXIT		
High	15	50.0%
Medium	13	43.3%
Low	2	6.7%
CONSTITUTIVE MEDIA		
Social	25	83.3%
Political	4	13.3%
Economic	1	3.3%
CONSTITUTIVE PURPOSE		
Exclusive Group Identity	22	73.3%
Interpersonal Identity	3	10.0%
Inclusive Social	2	6.7%
Public Material	3	10.0%

Ease of Exit

Ease of exit is perhaps one of the most obvious features that distinguishes virtual communities from offline groups. Much as anyone would expect, online groups have relatively higher ease of exit by virtue of the anonymous nature and lack of physical presence

groups. The sub-sample included 13 online groups that had been named Best Community by either *Yahoo!* *Internet Life Magazine* or the Webby Awards, and 15 of the most active newsgroups from the Usenet discussion network.

inherent in current computer-mediated interactions. When compared among online groups themselves, however, many varied differences emerge in ease of exit as they range from groups that are exclusively Internet-based to those that are online extensions of pre-existing offline institutions, to those that target people living in particular geographic regions. One-half of the groups from the sample were considered high ease of exit, as most or all of their interactions take place online. Over forty percent of the sample were categorized as medium ease of exit.⁴ The criteria for having medium or low ease of exit was based on being: (1) geographically-oriented (e.g., *Craigslist* serves specific metropolitan regions); (2) necessary to an offline recreational activity (e.g., *Geocaching* provides worldwide logistical information for the activity); (3) strong in internal communal culture (e.g., members of *Slashdot* submit and evaluate the website's content); (4) supportive of some interactions on the face-to-face level (e.g., *Seniornet* provides regionally-based technology instructional facilities for the elderly); and (5) supplementary to pre-existing relationships or organizations (e.g., *Greenpeace* is an online extension of the offline environmental organization). Those categorized as low ease of exit are groups that primarily facilitate offline gatherings. The two groups within this category were *Meetup.com* which serves as a technological instrument for organizing face-to-face meetings, and *Burningman* which allows participants to plan and discuss the annual festival.

For the most part, virtual communities remain very porous institutions for not only does the phenomenological reality of cyberspace encourage ease of exit, but the organizational reality of their components do as well. Neither the registration process nor

⁴ In general, I am generous in categorizing the groups in medium ease of exit in order to bring into relief the differences between virtual communities. Many of these groups could easily be considered having high ease of exit. It is understood that when compared to conventional face-to-face associations or communities, the "low ease of exit" virtual groups are not at all similar to the low exit contexts of families or close-knit communities.

the standards of conduct are fashioned to foster a strong sense of membership. In examining the mechanics of entry and exit, the costs to entry through the membership registration process are very low. Very little information is required of members in most groups, allowing most members to essentially remain anonymous (identified only by their username). Whatever personal information is disclosed to a community is usually voluntary. In a few communities, a subscription fee is required for entry, but for the most part, membership is free. In addition, it is interesting to note that there are no formal methods or implicit mores of departure. (On occasion, a member may post a farewell message in the discussion forum in which they had been regularly posting. However, it is far more likely for a group to simply presume that a member has left when it is eventually recognized that they have stopped posting messages.)

If a group's ease of exit is also influenced by their group's expectations of individual commitment, the mission statements which attempt to establish the culture and goals of the groups tend to set forth a vision of community that primarily accommodates the rights and autonomy of the individual. Rules of conduct which attempt to promote respect and civility among members set relatively low standards and are even apologetic about the need to lay down rules at all. Furthermore, the Terms of Service often address members as customers, reinforcing the mechanical and cultural realities that support a high ease of exit.

There are, of course, some exceptions. Some groups *do* attempt to increase members' sense of commitment through institutional means. *Slashdot* and *Kuro5hin* attempt to foster a stronger sense of commitment and ownership of the group by allowing members to not only provide the content—in the form of stories, articles, comments—but also determine what content gets posted. Another component that a few groups use to build commitment

among members is the cultivation and use of volunteer hosts and moderators. Rather than relegating the moderating responsibilities to a professional staff, investing power to regular members helps the community grow stronger as the viability and strength of an implicit social hierarchy is made explicit. The hope is that as members become more active in their participation, they will take leadership roles as community hosts and moderators.

Constitutive Media

Over eighty percent (83.3%) of the sampled groups were found to be embedded in social and cultural media, primarily facilitating discussions or information exchange affinity groups. These affinity groups support the maintenance of various social identities and help bring together those who shared interests in certain hobbies, activities, or causes. While these groups reproduce these social and cultural systems, I want to suggest that they are not socially constituted quite in the same way as Warren conceived. Warren argues that one of the important dynamics that characterize socially-constituted groups is that members will tend to avoid conflict in order to prevent any damage to the cultural systems that hold them together. In virtual communities, however, rather than finding that members are careful to preserve social harmony, they seem to be prone to rudeness and hostility as the mode of computer-mediated communication enhances their anonymity and social distance. As a result, the group's rules of conduct and Terms of Service are constantly striving to remind people to be civil and respectful of each other. In *Burningman's* forums, members are reminded that courtesy ought to be practiced online: "Before posting messages, take some time to read the forums and get a sense of how people interact. Coming on like a bull in a china shop will not win friends—respecting the ongoing flow of conversation

will....Remember that there is a thinking, feeling human behind every username. Always.”

One might say that these components serve to remind people that the virtual community *is* constituted socially, that there are in fact “*real* people on the other side of the screen” and that the social mores and etiquette that guide our face-to-face interactions need to apply online as well.

Warren does provide room in his discussion of social media for situations in which associations constituted by social media end up fostering more “informational content and points of view that are uncoupled from the thick contexts of simple interactions, from specific persons, and from practical obligations” (p. 116). These circumstances stem from particular structural locations of an association, so that increased distance in structural location between members, or “abstraction from...contexts that tend to be saturated with the demands of social reproduction and action” will essentially lead to more deliberative interactions befitting a public forum, rather than being restricted by the “social overburdening” of affective interactions such as friendships, family, small-group social life, and churches (p. 115). Warren considers mass print media and the Internet to be contexts in which its readers, listeners or viewers are abstracted from the basic “spatial structure of simple interactions.” However, I want to suggest that when this type of abstraction occurs within online contexts that are supposed to be “communities” rather than say, a newspaper, the quality of “social”-ness ends up being disengaged and individualistic. Instead of being concerned about preserving the social system, the discourse of virtual communities is generally geared towards promoting individual needs and preferences. This is particularly true in cases where individuals join groups in order to have access to match-making databases for relationships or employment. The quality of social media in many virtual

communities certainly does not bear the pragmatic impersonality of groups with economic or political media, but may exhibit the individualistic detachment attributed precisely to the economic and political.⁵ The ubiquity of the legal Terms of Service and Privacy Policy suggest that virtual communities are, in fact, quite unlike traditionally conceived “communities” or even “associations.” For the introduction of legal and contractual dimensions into what had formerly been socially constituted interjects a formal and distancing quality to the dynamics of online communities.

While the majority of virtual groups are socially constituted, 16.7% of the sample are politically constituted, most of which advocate a particular cause or politics. Two of the groups, *ACLU* and *Greenpeace*, are online extensions of the pre-existing activist organizations, and two others are wholly Internet-based sites of alternative media. The only group that is not interest-based is *Idealist.org*, a virtual contact center for those interested in working within non-profit organizations. It is worth noting that all of the politically constituted groups are sponsored by non-profit organizations, and are all left-leaning in politics and culture (with the exception of *Idealist.org*).⁶ These groups are the type commonly referenced in discussions of how new social movements and numerous grassroots efforts have been revitalized in part by this new technology (McCaughey and Ayers 2003; Gurak 1999). Cyberactivism on the Internet has been lauded by scholars and practitioners alike, as the technology dramatically aids in mobilization and distributing information efficiently to large groups of people.

The fact that only 5 of 30 of the most popular and esteemed virtual communities are politically constituted ought to give one pause about touting the extent to which pre-existing political organizations have exploited the many-to-many communication that the Internet

⁵ Though, as we will see in the following chapter, looking from a macro-institutional level, virtual communities are largely held together by economic media and rendered into a means of making revenue.

⁶ This phenomenon may either be indicative of the Internet's composition or the bias of the Webby awards.

offers.⁷ Even among these five groups, they are all clearinghouse models with information dissemination for interested readers as the primary function,⁸ while the deliberative component is often secondary.

Last, there is one group, *VoiceYourself*, embedded primarily in economic media (with some aspects in political media) as it strives to advocate consumer practices that dovetail environmental and ethical concerns. With a mission to “promote and inspire individual action to create global momentum towards simple organic living and to restore balance and harmony to our planet,” *VoiceYourself* envisions itself as a “communication hub that promotes simple organic living through conscious consumerism, the sharing of ideas and information, as well as encouraging civil disobedience.” Founded by actor Woody Harrelson and his wife Laura Louie, *VoiceYourself* “promotes and supports eco-friendly companies that help us get off the grid and leave a lighter footprint,” with one of the primary causes being the legalization of hemp.⁹

Constitutive Purposes

Seventy-three percent (73.3%) of the groups were primarily geared towards cultivating exclusive group identity goods. Approximately 22.8% (5 of 22 groups) targeted a particular demographic status such as gender, sexuality, race, or age; 45.4% (10 of 22 groups) focused on interests and hobbies of affinity; 31.8% (7 of 22) host a wide range of small forums that

⁷ Since the sample only includes groups that supports interactions between members, it can not speak to the way that political groups may have successfully used the Internet for information dissemination or member recruitment.

⁸ With the exception being *Idealist.org*, whose primary function is to help individuals interested in the non-profit sector connect with organizations, and visa versa. In fact, the other four were winners of the Activism Webby Award, and *Idealist.org* is the only politically-constituted group (and geared towards public material goods) that won a Best Community Webby Award.

⁹ Quoted from Mission Page, retrieved from http://www.voiceyourself.com/14_contactus/14_mission.php on March 30, 2004.

cover both status and affinity. The predominance of virtual communities geared towards exclusive group identity goods suggests that the majority of online communities are oriented towards serving individual members by enabling them to gather with or fostering personal relationships with those like themselves. Though these groups may host discussion forums that include those which discuss and debate matters that concern inclusive social goods or public material goods, members are still engaging these issues with those like themselves.

Three groups (*LiveJournal*, *Friendster* and *ICQ*) are strictly devoted to interpersonal identity goods as the main purpose of the communities is to supplement individuals with another means of contact with pre-existing friends or family. As *Friendster* defines itself: "an online social networking community that connects people through networks of friends for dating or making new friends."¹⁰ These three groups rely largely on pre-existing networks of contacts, rather than creating social spaces for wholly new ones. Warren suggests that though these groups may appear apolitical in their preoccupation with matters that are intimate and private, they can still help develop a sense of agency and provide shelter from external pressures of political or economic concern.

Two groups are oriented towards inclusive social goods which include those "goods that are essential to underwriting public spheres and political processes" (Warren, p. 132). The *ACLU* is devoted to reforming political processes and securing the rights of speech, while *Wikipedia*, works on compiling knowledge that is shared by all, not only in its reception but its very production as well. Three groups (*VoiceYourself*, *Greenpeace*, and *Idealist*) are dedicated to promoting public material goods. Seen as the most democratically efficacious, the nature of public material goods requires "collective action against the background

¹⁰ Quoted from "What is Friendster?" Page, retrieved from <http://www.friendster.com/info/moreinfo.jsp> on June 18, 2004.

potential for conflict” (p. 128). Despite aspirations to promote communal activism, these online groups are often relatively weak as a communal unit. Even when individuals possess a high degree of commitment to particular public material ends, the community frames participation in such a way that individuals often work as solitary agents and do not need to be in contact with other individuals occupying the same virtual space to participate in the work (Steinberg 2003). Therefore, these communities are largely based on aggregated, individual work, where there is often little or no cohesion or an unique culture that is developed online.¹¹

¹¹ The sample does not include any groups that are geared towards individual material or status goods, though these certainly exist on the Internet. Online groups that are devoted to exclusive consumer items such as luxury or sports cars are quite common among enthusiasts. The online auction website, *EBay*, epitomizes the orientation towards individual material goods as it facilitates the exchange and distribution of material goods.

TYPOLOGY OF AWARD-WINNING VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

EASE OF EXIT	MEDIA	CONSTITUTIVE PURPOSE			
		<i>Interpersonal Identity</i>	<i>Exclusive Group</i>	<i>Inclusive Social</i>	<i>Public Material</i>
High	Social	LiveJournal	Beliefnet BET.com ThirdAge Gay.com IVillage MTBR Bianca Café Utne DelphiForums TalkCity FictionAlley	Wikipedia	
Med	Social	Friendster ICQ	Seniornet The Well Kuro5hin Slashdot Craigslist Geocaching Nervousness Fray		
Low	Social		Burningman Meetup.com		
High	Pol		Alternet		VoiceYourself
Med	Pol			ACLU	Greenpeace Idealist.org
Low	Pol				
High	Econ				
Med	Econ				
Low	Econ				
		3 10%	22 73.3%	2 6.7%	3 10%

Discussion

Almost two-thirds (19 of 30= 63%) of the sampled groups have high or medium ease of exit, are socially constituted and are committed to exclusive group identity goods. All of the niche service groups (except for *Seniornet*) and the majority of the visionary communal groups fit this key typological category. As previously mentioned, categorizing many of the groups as possessing medium ease of exit is somewhat generous in that while they do facilitate *some* offline interactions or may cultivate a stronger peer culture, it is likely that most members do not ever take the opportunities to gather offline, and that groups attempting to build a strong internal culture struggle with the same sorts of challenges as those with weaker modes of membership.

What does it mean that most of the groups have high ease of exit, are socially constituted, and oriented towards enhancing exclusive group identity? According to Warren's typology of democratic effects, the high ease of exit in online groups encourages members to employ consumerist behaviors of choice in times of conflict or difference, rather than the exercise of voice and negotiation, making group commitment and long-term trust difficult to sustain. The predominance of groups with social media suggests that while these groups are helpful in fostering internal trust and social solidarity, they may be quite weak in cultivating skills in deliberation and debate. The focus on exclusive identity goods point to the Internet's capacity to support a wide variety of demographic or affinity groups. Fostering the public representation of marginalized identities, individuals can gain a sense of agency, solidarity, and efficacy. However, low levels of deliberation may occur because disagreement is often seen as a challenge to identity. Also, the corresponding combination of strong group identity, high potentials for mobilizing resistance and exclusive forms of trust

might yield low to mixed potentials in effects of cooperation or negotiation with those outside the group. To employ language from Putnam's bowling alone thesis, you might say that these groups are strong in producing bonding social capital, but are weak in cultivating bridging forms.

Overall, online communities seem to represent the types of associations that produce a relatively narrow range of democratic effects. They seem to be largely apolitical in focus, and most capable of producing goods that are oriented towards the individual members' personal sense of efficacy. In addition, the resulting typology reveals that the very kinds of groups that do generate a wide range of democratic effects (those with low exit, political media, and inclusive social or public material goods) are rare. Moreover, keeping in mind the balanced ecology of associations that Warren argues is necessary for democratic vitality, virtual communities—despite their varied content and form—do not represent a diverse associational ecology at all. Instead, they share a very uniform set of associational features so that they are mostly clustered in one part of the landscape.

To give some broader context to what this typological assessment means, it is interesting to note that when locating online communities within Warren's typology of offline associations, they appear to share similar associational features as new social movements, counter hegemonic lifestyle groups, and conventional fraternal orders. The comparison of virtual communities with conventional fraternal orders is especially ironic since fraternal orders epitomize the very forms of exclusivity and hierarchy that most virtual communities eschew and scorn. However, I want to suggest that the correlation may be surprisingly appropriate given the ways that the organization of virtual communities on the

Internet actually tends to create somewhat questionable conditions for protecting pluralism and negotiating difference.

As we have seen, virtual communities are organized according to identity, topic, or activity, and then framed within an ethic of individual choice. The logic undergirding these communities of choice is that individuals would prefer to join communities of people who are like themselves. Being in a community with those who are different in identity or interest is assumed to be a wearisome prospect at best. Though the Internet is usually praised for its inclusivity and egalitarianism, its capacity for so many diverse groups of people to peacefully co-exist together on the Internet relies precisely on the possibility of ignoring the particularity and difference that actually exist. Temptations of exclusivity are not strong in an environment where people of different social status or identity are not even trying to get into your group. This arrangement is a far cry from the type of "enlightened" or harmonious social realm that the Internet is envisioned to be, for there is no real engagement of difference. Ease of social interaction only results through the perception of sameness, the very obscuring of all that is particular.

Furthermore, when an online member "steps out" of their preferred community, the Internet is not configured with a commonly shared space that mixes people of different lifestyles and status. Online communities are not linked together like neighborhoods or street blocks that require you to drive through, or even be cognizant of the existence of an impoverished or wealthy part of town. Instead, online life can be hermetically sealed within the particular modes of interaction that are chosen within one's groups. Though the Internet provides a means for a wide range of people to gather together, there is little incentive nor organizational structure that encourages them to interact with those outside their group. As

such, the configuration of the Internet's online communities reinforce and exacerbate the processes of urbanization and suburbanization that have re-organized social life so that the overlay of function in one physical space is increasingly lost (Calhoun 1998). The concern here is that the Internet runs the risk of arranging social life so that people of different political, cultural, religious persuasions rarely interact with each other.

Even within those groups that provide room for debate, the social spaces for debate are often organized to be separated from the rest of the "community." In this way, tensions or conflicts that result from difference are often sequestered away from "normal life." For example, while *Beliefnet* is very active in being inclusive and encouraging dialogue across differences, it negotiates potentially volatile topics or identities by providing two forums: one for people who identify with the group, and one for purposes of debate. There is one forum that targets lesbian and gay members and there is a separate forum for debating homosexuality. In addition, specific areas of debate are set aside for abortion, animal rights, evolution and creationism. In the descriptions of these forums, members are strongly reminded to be "courteous" and "respectful," and to keep their messages "on-topic." Therefore, while *Beliefnet* supports hearty deliberation over hard issues, they are confined to carefully controlled settings and managed in a way that keeps it from interrupting the relationships and flow of other discussion in the community. Concerned about protecting free expression while fostering environments that are free from vitriolic exchanges, members with differences in opinion are often partitioned away from each other into separate forums.

Similarly, in forums for "newcomers" and "seekers," the guidelines for the forum bans any form of "proselytizing." In protecting the more vulnerable from the aggressive attempts of others, there is a way in which members are kept away from encountering the

unknown and that which will challenge them. In this way, there is a misdirected celebration of what the Internet can do to help communities engage difference. This management of differences modifies and profoundly alters the experience of free expression and egalitarianism by limiting its costs. As Calhoun (1998) suggests, such "compartmentalization of community life is antithetical to the social constitution of a vital public sphere" (p. 389, 392).

* *

In this analysis, we have seen that Warren's framework for analyzing the democratic efficacy of online communities is successful in avoiding the tendencies to evaluate online communities in reference to contested notions of community. The typologies provide a language and conceptual apparatus for understanding exactly what mechanisms are involved in enabling online communities to serve or threaten particular democratic ends, and for appreciating how online communities instantiate a particular combination of structural features that tend to yield few democratic effects. Moreover, Warren's approach helps to conceive of the online community as a distinct institutional structure that bears recognizable characteristics that can be analyzed and compared to other associational structures. No longer entities floating around in a nebulous social or cultural vacuum, online communities can be located within the broader ecology of associations. Therefore, such an analysis reduces the tendency to view computer-mediated communication *in opposition to* face-to-face communication, and to get distracted by the debate over the authenticity or "realness" of virtual communities. It takes seriously Calhoun's suggestion (1998) that scholars are better off focusing on the study of communities and associations in general and then seeing how

computer-mediated communication figures into their practices and organization, instead of “testing for community” in computer-mediated interactions:

We misunderstand [online communities] if we exaggerate its novelty rather than situate it within a continuing series of transformations in communication and transportation capacities that have shaped the whole modern era and if we fail to take seriously the differences between the ways in which people are commonly linked on the electronic web and the organization of face-to-face relationships (p. 380).

As such, technology is best understood as being reproductive of pre-existing social realities, while simultaneously bearing unique characteristics and features that introduce new institutional dynamics and possibilities.

Here, Karl Polanyi's notion of “institutional disembedding” proves useful. Polanyi understood the development of modern economic life as a matter of having “disembedded” economic relations from the social realm and “re-embedded” within a capitalist system of abstracted relations (Carrier and Miller 1998). In similar fashion, online communities are not merely entities that are “*not* face-to-face” communities. Rather, they instantiate a two-step process in which communication and social interaction are first “disembedded” from place-based, embodied conditions, and then “re-embedded” in a technologically-mediated environment that has its own institutional constraints and capacities. These two analytically distinct processes are often conflated in the literature on online communities, at the expense of recognizing the institutional breadth and thickness of the latter. The idea of “institutional disembedding” helps to emphasize the need to parse through what is gained and lost when the experience of communication is disembedded from face-to-face interactions and re-embedded in computer-mediated ones.

SHARPENING THE ANALYTICAL LENS

While Warren's typology of associations produces an useful composite of online communities, let me venture a brief critique on the way to saying that there is still work to be done on fully capturing the complex realities of online groups and their structures, and understanding what particular democratic effects might be expected from these groups. The process of applying the conceptual categories of associational features to actual virtual communities reveals that many of the groups are resistant to being neatly classified as one type of media or purpose over another. On several occasions, Warren does acknowledge that associations are complex and may be embedded in more than one media or combine a range of goods (p. 109, 124). Certainly, this difficulty found in classifying these groups is not one that is exclusive to online communities. Nancy Rosenblum (1996) points out that all associations are hybrid in character. There are always different and mixed ways to understand an association's nature and purpose. Often, an association's formal objectives are not congruent with the expectations and experiences of members, or the perceptions of outsiders. In the case of virtual communities, however, it is common to find that several groups have official missions communicated to its participants that are often not congruent with the aims and obligations expressed to its commercial partners and clients. How is one to determine which purpose most characterizes and influences a group's culture and efficacy then? Because website-based communities are entities that are often sponsored and operated by one party, managed and maintained by another, and participated and experienced by a third, determining their most dominant features and characteristics can be very difficult. One approach to addressing this problem is to engage online groups on three separate levels of analysis: macro-institutional, meso-collective, and micro-social. I propose that greater clarity

might be brought to the particular contexts and conditions of online communities by being precise and explicit about which level of analysis is being taken. Let me unpack these three levels of analysis.

First, analyses at the macro-institutional level of online communities would focus on matters that most directly address offline realities including how computer mediation introduces new structural conditions for communication and social interactions; and the Internet's role within the context of contemporary American society, concerning issues such as the digital divide and the role of market forces in the Internet's continuing development. Consider, for example, how a macro-institutional analysis might bring out the differences between the online communities *Bianca* and *BET.com*. On the surface, both can be considered high ease of exit, socially embedded groups geared towards exclusive group identity goods. However, while *Bianca* is the creation of two individual who wanted to start a "place on the Web to tell people how we live our lives," *BET.com* is the online extension of a mass media corporation (Silberman 1997). On *BET.com*, the "community" feature of the webzine is merely a part of a business model for cultivating customer loyalty. How is one to evaluate the fact that the corporate provider of the BET community is clearly interested in the economic value of African-American markets that they deliver to advertisers? How much does the economically-embedded context of *BET.com* influence the democratic effects of that online community? Classifying these groups strictly as social or economic media risks misrepresenting the clear differences in intention and experience between the producers of the community and the members who are increasingly viewed as consumers. While members of their online communities may be joining in order to build social attachments with like-minded or demographically-similar people, it is hard to ignore the fact that the community

exists as an economic entity for the parent companies as well. In contrast, *Bianca's* discussion forums are the heart of the community, the sole form of participation for its members. It solicits advertising not to make a profit, but to find ways to meet their necessary expenses. Taking into account the macro-institutional realities of organizations and individuals that build and drive these online communities, it becomes increasingly clear that *BET.com* and *Bianca* bear little resemblance with each other.

Second, the meso-collective level of analysis would focus on the "face-value" of the community website on its own terms. On this level, addressing an online community's stated and organizational features and conditions are of primary concern. For instance, different forms of participation might be guided by varying membership registration requirements or radically different organizational structures. Important distinctions might be made between forums which host discretely-defined conversations and groups that function as a gathering site or locale that engages its members in many different points of interaction. For example, the community of *iVillage* is comprised of hundreds of discussion forums that range by topic (e.g., marriage, finance, politics) and by demographics (e.g., women in their thirties, Asian-American women). *iVillage* is organized to meet several different purposes and support multiple forms of participation. An individual can legitimately belong to the group by not only posting messages within a wide range of discussion groups, but also being a moderator of a group, attending an offline gathering, or even just lurking. Contrast this structure with that of *Bianca's* which supports one level of participation or that of the *ACLU's* forums which focus on a narrow range of topics. Accounting for these various forms of participation is important in complexifying how one determines the democratic effects of a

group. In the previous chapter, I sought to address some of these differences by proposing the four models of online group cultures.

Third, the micro-social level of analysis would be directed at the conversation- or exchange-level of online communities where there are discrete purposes and media. This level concerns the actual interpersonal interactions that take place or activities that are engaged. In addition to identifying the content and culture of these discrete forms of interaction, one might also be careful to consider how this micro-social level might be influenced by the context of its macro-institutional and meso-collective realities.

By specifying these three levels of analyses, unnecessary confusions or overlapping of levels could be avoided in the assessment of online groups. Anthropologist David Hakken (1999) suggests a similar set of distinctions that ought to be made between macro-, mid-, and micro-social relations in online community literature to help bring coherence to the rapidly expanding cyberspace research. Hakken illustrates the common manner in which discussions about virtual communities often reduce the differences among levels, assuming that "what is demonstrated on one level is true for others as well." He points to the way that Howard Rheingold's account of online communities focuses on intimate social relations, but then extrapolates those observations to mid-range social relations that are typically connected to claims about democracy (Hakken, p. 107).

This conflation of analytical levels also is evident in the popular claim that the Internet inherently facilitates diverse and heterogeneous communal experience. This statement is accurate only at the meso-collective level of the Internet, where there is undeniably a wide range of websites and services that represent a wide variety and diversity of groups open to anyone. As we have seen, online communities have been particularly

efficacious for bringing together those of minority or marginalized status. Many groups like *Beliefnet* and *iVillage* offer discussion forums that intentionally bring people together to debate and dialogue over difficult political, moral, or ethical issues. On the micro-social level of analysis, however, there is usually little heterogeneity to be found. For *within* each of these groups, there is often extreme homogeneity since the majority of groups are defined by affinities of interests or demographic status. The problem of homogeneity emerges again when the Internet is evaluated on a macro-institutional level of the Internet. The digital divide persistently suggests that a particular degree of financial means, education, and technical skills correlates with Internet use, particularly participation in online groups. Making clear which level of analysis is being taken would more properly contextualize such claims and would aid the overall understanding of the actual structures and dynamics of the Internet and its online communities.

While it would be difficult to present an analysis that systematically engages all three levels and the various facets of each level, the following chapter seeks to address the macro-institutional level and the influence that the market has had on the virtual communities. I propose that the "re-embedding" of social relations online has been ultimately a process of resituating sociability and community within a reality guided by market demands. For one of the observations to make from the analysis of associational features and democratic effects is that the institutional structures that give context for virtual communities are surely implicated in what shapes online life. How else can one explain why it is that, while political or economic groups with lower ease of exit do exist in cyberspace, it is groups with high exit and social media that happen to dominate the online terrain? The technological design and medium of online communities may indeed be predisposed to support particular conditions

of membership and participation as many suggest, however, there are no inherently technological reasons for explaining *why* there are not more groups that are extensions of pre-existing organizations, or *why* there are not more groups that are devoted to political deliberation and public material goods. Instead, this analysis of the most popular and esteemed online communities suggests the particular cultural forms of association and community that are most preferred, legitimized, and resonant in our society today. The fact is, "not all technological possibilities become social realities, and the directions of actual change depend a good deal on existing institutions and distributions of power and resources" (Calhoun 1998, p. 389). As we will see, as long as commercial interests continue to exploit the design and substance of the Internet for the purposes of niche-marketing, exclusive group identity goods may likely continue to characterize the constitutive purposes of most online groups. Therefore, to merely focus on whether the Internet will encourage passive or active citizenship is to risk missing the larger story of the market's role in the development and uses of online communities, and its potential capacity to shape our most fundamental conceptions and experiences of social solidarity and communal life. Let us now turn to consider this story.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE COMMODIFICATION OF COMMUNITY

Somehow the dream of Jeffersonian democracy through optic fibers [has] been transposed into the increased chance of saving a twenty minute round trip to the video rental store.

-Darin Barney

Why should we finally expect our technologies to look much different than the society and the economics of the world that produces and puts them to use?A commercial culture will entail a commercialized technology. A society dominated by the ideology of privatization will engender a privatized Internet.

-Benjamin Barber

Warren's conceptual framework helped us create a composite picture of virtual communities and their potential effects on the vitality of civil society. But technologies are social products that function and are given meaning within a socio-cultural reality instantiated through institutions. Therefore, one must consider the cultural, social and political contexts that shape how users perceive and use the technology, and how the technology itself interacts with and shapes its environment. As Steven Brint (2001) argues, "Any structural theory of community must...be supplemented by an appreciation of the role of environmental context and of community-building mechanisms" (p. 17). Perhaps, no phenomenon has so powerfully shaped the development of the Internet as the market.

As one of the most dominant features of our contemporary existence, the market has gradually extended its influence over more and more spheres of life. While the expansion of the market and its mechanisms sometimes is greeted with enthusiasm (Cowen 2002; Twitchell 1999), more often than not, it is considered destructive and corrosive to the areas of life that it envelopes (Miller 2003; Hochschild 2003; Schor 1998). The narrative of decline is especially common when considering how the market influences public life. General discomfort characterizes discussions of the extent to which the realm of politics and

governance is influenced by corporate interests and economic pressures (Sandel 2000; Radin 1996; Kuttner 1997). Less direct, but just as troubling are the ways that techniques and strategies of the market are introduced into the dynamics of public life. For example, the nature and substance of American politics and its campaigns has been shaped and arguably diminished by the use of public polling and corporate advertising expertise. As Jodi Dean remarks in *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (2002):

In the United States...the proliferation of media has been accompanied by a shift in political participation. Rather than actively organized in parties and union, politics has become a domain of financially mediated and professionalized practices centered on advertising, public relations, and the means of mass communication. Indeed, with the commodification of communication, more and more domains of life seem to have been reformatted in terms of market and spectacle, as if valuation itself had been rewritten in binary code. Bluntly put, the standards of a finance- and consumer-driven entertainment culture set the very terms of democratic governance today.

The worry that “more and more domains of life seem to have been reformatted in terms of market and spectacle” is a contemporary concern rooted in a long history of sociological inquiry (Weber 1992 [1930]; Ritzer 1996; Wuthnow 1987; Thomas 1989; Bell 1976). Weber’s notion of the iron cage of rationality—the manner in which achieving an efficiency of means, at the expense of a substantive end, comes to be practiced in all of society’s institutional spheres—speaks to the way that the market has become a “defining institution.” From the Frankfurt School’s concern that mass-marketing erodes the authority of traditional socializing institutions to the fear that strategies of market segmentation have trivialized the politics of difference, sociological critiques often see a close relationship between commodification and the attenuation of self and social relations (Dunn 2000).

As the market exercises what Jurgen Habermas calls “the colonization of the lifeworld,” it envelopes individuals and transforms them into consumers. Even the

ostensibly "sacred" realms of art and religion are subject to market influence. Individuals "shop" for churches and churches adopt marketing strategies to fill their pews and parking lots. Art is appropriated for commercial ends and dependent on corporate sponsorship for its very production and display. Such colonization of "sacred" spheres that were formerly considered immune or protected from the "profane" dynamics of the market points to a process that is at once less obvious and more profound in its effects than concerns about direct economic issues of inequality and private interests. Therefore, the trouble with the commodification of communication is not merely a matter of legitimate communication becoming dependent on established systems of profit as Dean suggests in the above quote, but that our very conception of communication becomes transformed. In the same way, the concern about the market's influence on the Internet is not merely that cyberspace gets increasingly commercialized, but that the experience of social connection and the very conception of community becomes reshaped as well.

To study the role of the market on any institution or sphere of life is to take on an enormous project. Among the many complex facets raised are: the transactional dimension of economic exchange; the commercialization and profit-making aims of corporate sponsorship; the particular habits of relating to objects or institutions that develop from consumer culture; the abstraction of entities subjected to commodification; and the instrumentalization that results from the processes of rationalization and bureaucratization. While these facets are each deserving of thorough investigation, the story of the market and virtual communities presented in this chapter will strive to show how current trends in these communities illustrate and epitomize the commodification of community and the fate of public life in a consumer culture. In this effort, I take up the following questions: In what

ways do virtual communities become institutions that derive revenue? How does the economic reality of a virtual community shape its development? In what ways are online communities rendered services and members into consumers? To begin this account of the market and virtual communities, let us first briefly consider the early history of the Internet and the complex dynamics that serve as a backdrop to their development.

FROM COUNTERCULTURE TO COMMERCIAL

From its origins, the Internet has been celebrated for its decentralization, egalitarianism, and flexibility. Despite tendencies to cast these characteristics as inherent aspects of the Internet and computer-mediated communication, a brief examination of the Internet's development reveals that its unique architecture and configuration is a product of historically contingent, bureaucratic factors. Beginning with the US Defense Department's desire to create a high-speed computer network that could facilitate the collaborative efforts of geographically dispersed researchers and survive a nuclear war, the basic architectural structure of the Internet was designed to be a decentralized network of networks. With the absence of a command center, the Internet resists the central control of most communication systems. While government institutions provided the financial and institutional resources for such research, the academic community of computer science departments provided intellectual horsepower. Furthermore, the ongoing campus culture of the late 1960's added a grassroots dimension to the development of the Internet so that computer hobbyists and hackers regarded computer networking as a tool of liberation, a means of power through information that could undermine both government and corporate power. This ideology of freedom influenced the openness that characterizes the Internet's architecture, encouraging

anyone skilled in computer programming to tinker with communication protocols and code, becoming co-producers of the technology. Being "...born at the unlikely intersection of big science, military research, and libertarian culture," the Internet instantiates an unusual mix of concern for control, power, and freedom (Castells 2001, p. 17).

As the Internet evolved and become central to a burgeoning high tech industry, a "pervasive weltanschauung" grew out of the Internet's complex roots that Paulina Barsook (2000) dubbed "technolibertarianism." This ideology valorizes the free and creative entrepreneur as it ranges from "the classic 18th Century liberal philosophy of that-which-governs-best-governs-least love of laissez-faire free-market economics to Social Darwinism, anarcho-capitalism, and beyond" (p. 3). This revolutionary quality was captured in early visions of cybercities and virtual reality, where cyberspace would become a wholly alternative realm where individuals interact and live. While these new technological possibilities animated postmodern theorists in their capacity to challenge the dichotomies of the real and unreal, embodied and disembodied, the world of business was undergoing an incredible sea change as the Internet transformed the scope and scale of economic transactions and distributions by radically altering the systems of information and communication. As information was made available to the largest corporation and the smallest entrepreneur simultaneously, and as manufacturers found new ways to circumvent middlemen and directly reach consumers, the Internet seemed to turn the entire world of markets upside down.

While there remain pockets of free-wheeling anarchic interactions in cyberspace and opportunities to use the Internet to undermine conventional systems of power, the technology has become domesticated. Originally owned and subsidized by the government and public resources, it has been largely commercialized since 1995. That the Internet should

become bedfellows with large corporate interests is noteworthy because it is actually one of the few technologies whose early development occurred without the influence of business or corporations. Unlike most other communication technologies, the innovation and production of the Internet was generally free of monopolistic forces and other forms of economic determinism. In fact, the Internet had initially appeared to be such a risky venture that the Microsoft Corporation and major phone companies saw little sense in investing and were forced to suddenly change their corporate strategies entirely when the technology's potential began to become obvious (Streeter 2003). As the market brought the Internet to mainstream use, the formerly exclusive culture of the Internet gradually changed. The dominance of homespun alternative newsgroups on Usenet and list-servs gave way to the pre-packaged user-friendly world of American Online. The informal code of behavior that had guided social interactions was rendered ineffective as the number of message posters skyrocketed, opening the floodgates both to increased inexperience and deviance. The utopian visions of the counterculture were fast being replaced by the venture capitalists' eye for profit.

As a result, many have regarded the Internet as yet another victim of the hegemonic forces of capitalism. Robert McChesney (1996) wrote: "Although the Internet clearly has opened up space for progressive and democratic communication, the notion that the Internet will permit humanity to leapfrog over capitalism and corporate communication seems dubious unless public policy forcefully restricts the present capitalist colonization of cyberspace." Not only has the Internet become a commercially owned and operated technology, but it arguably *enhances* and *strengthens* existing capitalist relations and processes (Barney 2000, p. 107, 120). While it has undeniably helped countervailing forces make a dent

in existing power structures,¹ these noted triumphs still pale against the prevailing tendency of the Internet to reinforce conventional institutions of power. Whether it is through global production and distribution systems, surveillance, or information management systems, the Internet enhances existing institutional structures.

In light of the Internet's evolution, virtual communities have followed a similar fate. As a technology that had been envisioned to challenge traditional modes of association and activism, virtual communities were supposed to rescue social interactions from the outmoded coercive dynamics of conventional face-to-face communities and associations, re-situating them within a culture and context where power is decentralized and harnessed for the common person. Instead, social relations have been re-embedded within a market-driven Internet. The resulting circumstances are such that these interactions are not free from coercive forces of power, but simply subject to a new power. Ultimately, the countercultural ideal of community within the Internet and the virtual community is overwhelmed by an even more powerful institution—the market. This is an ironic twist of fate for a technology that had promised the weak, poor, and disenfranchised a leveling of the playing ground against the rich, powerful, and established.

Clearly, the culture of cooperative academic research and the communitarian spirit of early bulletin boards and virtual groups have been increasingly marginalized out of the mainstream use of the Internet (Barney 2000). However, the result is not simply a shift of countercultural ideals from the core to the fringe. Despite the fact that the Internet technology industry has been largely preoccupied with “liquidity events and branding” (Barsook, p. xi), the culture of virtual communities frequently maintains a flavor of

¹ In highly-publicized social movements such as Mexico's Zapatistas and China's exiled democracy activists, the Internet is credited for enhancing the maintenance of dispersed face-to-face networks and popular mobilization.

cyberculture's informality and an iconoclastic "taken-for-granted anti-government, individualist neoliberalism" (Streeter 2003, p. 2). Nevertheless, while strains of these earlier ideals are evident in the discourse of individuality, egalitarianism and free speech that frame online communities, they are largely undermined and overwhelmed by the realities of the business of virtual communities. It is to this economic reality that our attention now turns.

THE BUSINESS OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

While the first wave of online groups and newsgroups were completely free of economic interests, the Internet boom of the middle to late 1990's and the ensuing post-boom web world of the twenty-first century forced many online communities to face the sobering financial realities of sustaining a community and their websites. Despite the fact that "in community-building circles, 'revenue' [was] a dirty word," online groups needed to find ways to meet the rising costs associated with hardware and software evolution and maintenance, technical and support staff, and content provision (Powazek 2002). One of the most common results of the Internet's economic downturn was the acquisition of smaller virtual communities by larger corporate entities. Like many independently-run, small-scale websites, their fate was to become owned and operated by corporations that amassed a number of online groups under their management. Even a community as active and renowned as *The Well* was acquired in 1999 by Salon.com, an online media company. It is surprising and somewhat ironic then to find that as famous as *The Well* was for its pioneering role in online community building and architecture, and for its very distinct culture that grew out of being

“settled by an eclectic mix of writers, veterans of counter-culture and computer experts,” it too had become bureaucratized and swept along into the mainstream.²

Part of *The Well's* bureaucratization involved charging subscription fees to defray costs as many other virtual communities did as well. The effectiveness of this strategy was mixed, however, as surveys found that even if most people might be willing to pay money for website content, they generally were not willing to pay money just to be able to talk to each other, especially when there were other options that were free.³ Rather than charging a fee, many non-profit groups call on their members to give donations or make purchases that would help their communities meet their expenses. The methods of fundraising range widely, often varying according to the lifestyle demographics of a group's members. *FictionAlley* held a pledge drive to support the purchasing of their own server. They asked for \$5 from 700 of its 50,000 registered users. *Fray* sells *Fray* paraphernalia such as t-shirts, coffee mugs, and compact disc recordings of live story-telling sessions. *Seniornet* suggests transferring stock, making a bequest, establishing a trust, giving real estate, donating life insurance, establishing a memorial, and taking advantage of employer matching funds as possible ways to support the community.

While non-profit communities struggled to find creative ways to stay afloat, commercial communities did not fair any better. Even a successful virtual community like *iVillage*, one of the leading women's network online, barely earned a profit six years into its existence. Up and running since 1995, *iVillage* had to layoff two-thirds of its employees and underwent a major management overhaul in 2000 (Hansell 2002). In response to the

² Quoted from The Well Backgrounder page. Retrieved from <http://www.well.com/background.html> on March 22, 2004.

³ According to Jupiter Media Metrix, web users were asked what they were willing to pay, 63% said “nothing” (Powazek 2002).

bursting of the Internet bubble, Internet corporations would buy out competitors or form partnerships with other commercial websites much like traditional media conglomerates that own a number of companies that crisscross the televisual, radio, movie, print and music industries. In the case of *iVillage* Inc., the company operates not only the *iVillage* website, but also its former rival Women.com Networks. In addition, it owns *iVillage* Parenting Network (which is a holding company for Lamaze Publishing Company, operator of The Newborn Channel, and publisher of Baby Steps magazine,) and Knowledgeweb which operates the Astrology.com website. *iVillage* also employed other conventional strategies such as finding investors and partners so that its marketing partners currently include Ford Motor Company, PNC Bank, Kimberly-Clark, Proctor and Gamble, Pfizer, Visa, Charles Schwab, Ralston Purina, and Johnson & Johnson. Its investors and partners include AOL, MSN, Google and Hearst Corporation.⁴

iVillage continued to seek sources of capital by introducing not only outside sponsorship of the community, but also branded content and promotions. *iVillage* carries 19 branded channels organized by subject matter including Astrology, Babies, Beauty, Diet & Fitness, Entertainment, Food, Health, Home & Garden, Money, Parenting, Pets, Pregnancy, Relationships, and Work. In 2002, a line of *iVillage*-brand vitamins and nutraceutical supplements, and an entire line of *iVillage* products including makeup, bath oils, baby formula, toys, and gifts for men were introduced. CEO Douglas W. McCormick, former head of the Lifetime cable channel, hoped that the branded product strategy would bring in half the company's revenue by 2004. *iVillage* Inc. also signed with a publishing press to repackage existing *iVillage* website content into books and began exploring the possibilities

⁴ According to Media Metrix Digital Media Audience Ratings Report (9/03), as stated on "iVillage Top-Line metrics" page. Retrieved from http://www.ivillage.com/ivillage/adsales/articles/0,,269016_269024,00.html on March 15, 2004.

of offering content in the form of subscription-only online courses. McCormick even considered starting his own *iVillage*-brand Internet service provider (Hansell 2002). While these strategies attracted attention for their innovation and creativity, ultimately the stability of *iVillage's* success has been due to its more traditional strategies of seeking sponsorships and getting into the business of online advertising.

The introduction of advertisements to both noncommercial and commercial community websites was surrounded by great expectations. Online advertising seemed like the perfect source of revenue since the Internet could easily gather active and captive audiences. In the first half of 1997, the Internet Advertising Bureau (IAB) reported that network ad revenue exceeded \$343 million, a 322% increase over the same period a year before (Barney, p. 184). One of the first forms of online advertising involves a hypertext link that allowed interested consumers to "click through" to the advertising pages that were linked to the main site. These ads were largely declared ineffective as they were paid for on the basis of how many "clicks" its hyperlink received and few Internet users actually bothered to "click through." Instead, users tended to circumvent these commercial messages as is common practice for televisual and radio advertising. A more popular form of advertising called "banner ads" display images of a product with accompanying slogan or text like an electronic billboard. Though users still were not clicking on ads, IAB studies showed that the very exposure to a banner ad increased product awareness (p. 185). Therefore, these ads are paid at a predetermined rate per visits that the site where the banner is on view receives. High traffic websites charge higher rates for banner ads just as prime-time television shows can charge more for advertising time. In 1997, banner ads accounted for 80% of online ad placements (p. 185). Though online advertising ultimately has not been

as successful as many hoped, they remain an undeniable fixture in many community websites.

As Internet users have become more and more savvy through the years, advertisements have become increasingly aggressive. Pop-up ads and flash banners are used to bombard the users' visual senses. On *Beliefnet*, every time a user clicks on a link for a new page, their route is interrupted by a pop-up ad for South Beach Diet.⁵ *iVillage* employs some of the most aggressive advertisements, not only subjecting a user to pop-up ads, but also rerouting the user involuntarily to a completely separate advertisement page before directing them to the intended page of choice.⁶ The ubiquity and relentlessness of online advertising has annoyed Internet users, making less invasive ads called "text ads" quite popular for their minimalist approach. Considered "community-friendly advertising," text ads are small in size and often discretely off-set to the side of a website's primary content (Powazek 2002). Introduced by Google, they are cheap to buy at only \$10 to \$20 per ad, inviting a wider range of advertisers than those able to afford banner or pop-up ads. Some virtual communities such as *DelphiForums* capitalize on the distaste that Internet users have for advertising and offer membership packages graded according to the degree of advertisement-free forum space that is desired. In contrast, non-profit groups such as *Craigslist* and *FictionAlley* make a point to assure their members that their web pages and forum interactions will remain free of advertising. Albeit a small point of resistance to the power dynamic of commercial interests, the refusal of advertising symbolically expresses their alternative ethic.

⁵ Observed on www.beliefnet.com, March 10, 2004.

⁶ Observed on www.ivillage.com, March 15, 2004.

At the same time that existing online communities were adopting standard methods of generating revenue amidst the increasingly competitive conditions of the Internet, commercial websites began to view the installation of "community" features as a promising means of making their sites more profitable. A study from 2000-2001 showed that users who contributed to the bulletin boards or chats on news websites such as CNN.com and Weather.com were found to visit almost five times as often as those who did not use these interactive features.⁷ These users looked at four times as many pages each session and were twice as likely to return (Stirland 2003). In 2002, a study of e-commerce sites showed that one-third of its users participated in the chat rooms and bulletin boards. These were the same people who made up two-thirds of all the purchases at the sites. Those who engaged in community features were reported to be nine times more likely to return to the site and twice as likely to make a purchase.⁸ Though these online community tools themselves did not make money on their own, they kept readership up and cultivated loyalty to the site.

The degree of success that adding "community" features had on increasing website traffic and user loyalty created a huge demand for expert knowledge on how to design socially and economically-successful communities. As a result, a small cottage industry of consultants, workshops, and research developed to meet the growing interest in the commercial potential of various "social software." Former pioneers of virtual community went into the business of consulting, designing, and managing virtual communities for other organizations and companies. For example, *Utne Communities* is an online community service stemming from the Utne Reader Magazine corporation. Having been in the business of online communities since 1995, *Utne Communities* offers clients customized technical and

⁷ Though in Powazek's essay (2002), he reports that CNN shut down its discussion features.

⁸ According to a study conducted by McKinsey & Company and Jupiter Media Metrix, as reported on January 11, 2002 at http://www.nua.ie/surveys/index.cgi?f=V/S&art_id=905357545&rel=true.

management support. Their "portfolio [of] community solutions" includes "everything from large, general-interest forums open to the public, to small, highly focused work spaces integrated into private organizational intranets."⁹

In general, "community experts" give advice about how to construct online communities that effectively wed business goals with community goals. Their recommendations revolve around two central problems that online communities must negotiate: (1) *member recruitment and retention* and (2) *social control*. First, because computer-mediation allows online communities to be removed from the conventional physical and spatial dimensions of social interactions and solidarity, participants are granted new levels of anonymity and personal autonomy that make virtual communities vulnerable to behavior commonly referred to as "drive-by posting" or "post-and-go" practices. As one among many communities of choice, online groups must vie for the attention of potential group members who can "shop" around for their preferred communities. The new market of communities creates difficult dynamics of member recruitment and retention. Each online community struggles for distinction amidst a chaotic sea of websites, and must find creative ways to deter members from leaving the group since it is so easy to do so. The extent to which the content and form of the virtual community are appealing and user-friendly needs to all be carefully considered. Techniques on how to best encourage active participation are presented by communication consulting firms. In the report "Next Generation Community, From Retention to Revenue," Jupiter Communications recommends three fundamental community tools as the most effective ways to maximize social interaction: generic community tools such as chats and emails, personal publishing tools such as home pages or

⁹ Quoted from "Utne Communities at Work" page of the *Café Utne* website. Retrieved on February 12, 2003.

weblogs; and organization tools such as personal calendars.¹⁰ Similarly, Jim Cashel (2001), publisher and editor of "The Online Community Report," discusses successful strategies adopted by profit-making websites such as adding dating personals or job classifieds to encourage Internet users to return to a given community.

Second, as we saw in Chapter Three, the majority of website-based communities have sought a balance between supporting the flexibility and freedoms that come with online anonymity and establishing some form of sanction and social order through methods of disclosure in the registration process and rules of conduct. Since online anonymity opens the door to unwelcome disruptions such as spamming, trolling (i.e., purposeful incitement or provocation through vulgar or hostile remarks), and manipulation of persona identities, online communities have an interest in minimizing these factors and fostering a legitimate, safe, and creative space of social interaction that is attractive and welcoming. With the demands of creating and maintaining a community that "works" under the potentially anarchic conditions of cyberspace, community consultants help groups set up structures and organizational features that support active discussion and shape the behaviors and uses of the community so that the group adequately meets the challenges and remains competitive against other virtual communities. Most community experts say that the key to a healthy community is not in the technology, but the people involved in the group (Silberman 1997; Williams 1997). *Utne Communities* explains to potential clients that "a great community involves great planning, implementation, and monitoring every step of the way....We can

¹⁰ As reported in "Next Generation Communities" article released by Jupiter Communications on January 4, 1999. Retrieved from http://www.nua.ie/sirveus/index.cgi?f=VS&art_id=905354601&rel=true.

train you to do the job yourself. Or we can provide you with ongoing service [through its team of] experienced hosts, guaranteed to bring out the best of those who visit.”¹¹

This studied reality behind the business of virtual communities undoubtedly dampens romantic notions of virtual communities as homegrown and self-governing entities. The temptation to wax poetic about the Internet’s inherent freedoms and unbound creativity is tempered when one realizes how so much of online communities are bureaucratically planned and strategically considered. More importantly, however, the discovery of how the cultivation of communal bonds can be used to strengthen consumer loyalty ultimately has the effect of commodifying the very community unit. This appropriation is one step further down the road of commodification, for while it is one thing to have advertisements plastered all over one’s online communal experience, it is another for the community itself to become a commodity. The professionalization of online community building not only has the effect of reducing the process of cultivating social solidarity to a set of techniques, but also blurs the boundary between that which is effective commercially and communally. Lines that have conventionally divided the social and the economic are repeatedly crossed as online communities are regarded as “ready-made” cultural products that money can buy. In the following section, I will show that, as virtual communities are powered by companies that are in the business of creating and managing communities, the social interactions and identities that are formed and shaped within those environments are inextricably bound up with particular strategies and agendas of the companies. The process of commodification is found to be thorough-going as members are encouraged to approach

¹¹ Quoted from “Utne Communities at Work” page of *Cafe Utne* website. Retrieved on February 12, 2003.

communities as consumers, and virtual communities in turn pitch themselves to companies as the ideal platform and service for marketing.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF COMMUNITY

The dual process of online communities organizing and conducting themselves as businesses with economic aims, and commercial sites hosting discussion forums as a means of building customer loyalty signifies the complete incorporation of social connection and solidarity into the market. As J. MacGregor Wise (2003) suggests:

What we are seeing is a corporate-consumerist territorialization of cyberspace, channeling affect into profit. Of course, virtual communities are not exempt from these processes, from the sale of the WELL to the establishment of 'community components' at commercial sites. There are many reasons why people are online; the attraction of the digital sublime is just one. We must remember that corporate capital did not create this eruption of affect, but is beginning to manage it (p. 128).

In what sense are affect and social connection managed within virtual communities? In the following section, I will discuss how, most fundamentally, virtual communities encourage members to approach and engage the community as a service in which social relationships are merely one of the many commodities or goods that the community supplies.

From the preceding analyses of Chapters Three and Four, many indications pointed to the ways that members of virtual communities are steered by the discourse and praxis of virtual communities towards engaging the community through the lens of consumption. The high ease of exit that generally characterizes these groups encourages members to exercise consumerist behaviors, so that they choose to remain or abandon the community according to their own satisfaction. The very language that is adopted in mission statements expresses the extent to which these communities are devoted to meeting the personal needs of its

members. Frequently, communities are described as “providing solutions” for its members much as a company or firm would provide “business solutions” to clients (emphases added):

- *Ivillage* is “devoted to *providing women with solutions* for all aspects of their lives in a well-lit, safe, supportive, community environment.”
- *Café Utne* states that “The mission of Utne Online is to support the company’s mission of *providing people with new and innovative solutions* for living more balanced, fulfilling lives, and bringing about positive change in the world.”

While these “solutions” are usually social in nature, helping individuals negotiate the challenges that contemporary life poses to their identity and sense of connection, virtual communities promote a vision of the authentic self through a “language of self-determination and transformation [that merges] an ethic of nonconformism and impulse with a vigorous consumerism” (Davis 2003).

The relationship that members have with the community is often a transactional one as online groups support an *economy of information* in which individuals gain more access to activities, services, and privileges when they give over more information about themselves. In the registration process, the majority of virtual communities do not require much information from their members, but there are many optional opportunities to provide personal information that become a part of each member’s “profile.” Profiles are often linked to a member’s username and can be searched or accessed whenever they post a message. These profiles range from basic profiles that simply display a photograph and name, to very detailed ones that include personal biographies, hobbies and interests, occupation, city and state of their home location, and an assortment of contact information (IRC Chat handle names, AOL group affiliations, etc). In addition to these self-disclosed pieces of information, it is not uncommon for profiles to also include tracking information

such as the number and location of their postings, the date they joined the community, and the time they last contributed.¹²

The fact that members often seem quite eager to provide personal information that the virtual communities themselves do not require is quite striking. While much of this phenomenon may reveal a naiveté or ignorance about the degree of public exposure their private information actually has on the Internet, I want to suggest that the willingness to which people will disclose their personal information is connected to their desires to utilize the community for personally-oriented purposes. In groups such as *BET.com*, *Friendster*, and *Gay.com*, personal profiles play a large role in the strong culture of seeking romance through its dating services. In recreational groups such as *Geocaching*, *Burningman*, and *MTBR*, profiles function to help people socialize with others who share their interests. People use *Idealist.org* to search for employment or volunteer opportunities in non-profit organizations and build profiles that frequently function as informal resumes. In all, the economy of information in these groups reinforces the individual members as consumers and the communities as services.

Although belonging and affirmation are perennial goods that we seek in any community setting, the logic of commodification transforms these age-old human longings so that personal growth is reduced to a calculus of maximum returns. If it simply was a service like a matchmaker's service or a therapist's professional counsel, it would be acceptable because of the economic nature expected in those relationships. But, because these acts of consumption are framed within contexts that are communal, the line between experiencing individual fulfillment as a by-product of community and experiencing

¹² Individual members can usually decide to hide or not hide certain pieces of information from being widely accessible to all or restricted to a selected group of individuals whom they designate.

fulfillment as a goal of community is blurred. As Robert G. Dunn (2000) suggests, "While individuals increasingly see themselves and act as consumers, far from replacing core identities consumerism *reshapes* or *inflects* them in new ways, providing new contexts for their construction and reconstruction" (p. 125). He continues: "The fate of identity, thus, would seem closely linked to distinctions between activities of 'consuming' on the one hand and those of 'relating, interacting, sharing' on the other, opposing tendencies which intermingle, combine, antagonize, reconcile, and merge in ever-changing combinations" (p. 132).

The distinction between consumption and relationship is further blurred by the Terms of Service and Privacy Policy found in each online community. These documents formally situate the community and its members in a contractual relationship and heighten the transactional dimensions of participation in an online community. The Terms make explicit the way that the dynamics of virtual communities do not merely involve individual members and the community at large, but rather consist of a triangulation between the individual member, the community, *and* a third-party service provider that runs the community and is legally responsible for what occurs on the community website. These Terms firmly express the community providers' interest in protecting itself and squaring out the boundaries of its legal obligations.

In contrast, there are a number of virtual communities whose Terms favor the rights and interests of the individual members. While the Terms of Service for the majority of niche service and commercial communities are oriented towards protecting their corporate interests, the Terms for nonprofit clearinghouse groups are more likely to reassure members of the obligations and responsibilities that the community will provide for them. Take, for example, *LiveJournal's* Social Contract. The Contract functions as a pledge or service

guarantee that the website administrators give to its users: "We at LiveJournal try to ensure that our service is as pleasant as possible for each user, so we've assembled a list of promises we will keep." It lists the following commitments:

- Work with the community, for the community. We promise to keep you informed of changes to the best of our abilities without being intrusive. We promise to run our business based on feedback from the LiveJournal community, and with the LiveJournal community's best interests in mind.
- Maintain reliable uptime within the limits of technical considerations. We try to keep things running smoothly for everyone, especially since we use the system just as much as anyone else. Unfortunately server hangups do occur, but we will plan ahead as best as possible to avoid them.
- Stay Advertisement Free. It may be because it's one of our biggest pet peeves, or it may be because they don't garner a lot of money, but nonetheless, we promise to never offer advertising space in our service or on our pages.
- Never send you unsolicited e-mail. We strongly believe that spam has no place on the internet, and we promise never to send you any e-mail without your implied or explicit consent. We promise to never sell lists of users' e-mail addresses or personal information, and we promise never to spam on the behalf of an interested third party.

The contract's language explicitly refers to the running of the *LiveJournal* community as a "business" and acknowledges that pragmatic reasons may inform their pledge not to rely on advertising. But overall, their intent is to appear "on the people's side" by promising to consider user feedback and keeping advertisements out of their communities.

Despite these attempts to counter the dehumanizing effects of corporate interests, these Terms of Service inevitably frame the community as a service and the individual member as a shrewd consumer of what the community has to offer. As Benjamin Barber (2003) suggests: "The technology is not per se commercial or commercializing, but commercialized; it becomes one more weapon in the arsenal of corporations for whom consumption is the only relevant human behavior" (p. 270). Engagement of the community is mediated by an instrumental criteria that the members bring with them as they seek out particular guaranteed ends. As a result, the economic behavior of consumption becomes an activity that comfortably exists within the affective context of community. This development

is further exacerbated by the fact that members themselves are rendered commodities as they are "delivered" to marketers.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF MEMBERS

Though the integration of commercial interest within the affective settings of community may cause some unease, the existing partnerships between online communities and marketers suggest that it is a combination to which providers and participants are fast growing accustomed. For increasingly online communities serve both the members and the marketers that community providers are courting.

One of the most basic services that virtual communities provide is a constant flow of information culled from the demographic profiles of group members during the registration process. The economy of information does not merely involve members transacting with the community for their own goods, but also includes the community acquiring and selling its information on members to advertisers and marketers.

**CROSSTAB OF REQUIRED REGISTRATION INFORMATION
AND MODEL TYPE**

<i>Model Type</i>	Niche	Clearinghouse	Visionary	Technical	TOTAL
<i>Required Information</i>	(N=7)	(N=10)	(N=6) ¹³	(N=6)	N
Name	5	5	2	4	16
Username & Password	6	7	5	5	23
Valid Email	7	10	6	6	29
Zip Code	5	0	1	3	9
Country	4	2	0	1	7
Birth date	5	1	1	2	9
Sex/ Gender	4	0	1	3	8

In the table above, it is clear that while general logistical information such as usernames and emails are equally required across all the categories of online groups, niche service groups are the most aggressive in soliciting demographic information. Niche service groups constitute five of the nine groups asking for zip codes, five of the six groups requesting birth date, and half of the groups asking for gender specification. There is little coincidence in finding that the niche service groups which already target lifestyle groups are highly interested in their members not only as customers, but as aggregated forms of marketing information. In contrast, as we saw in Chapter Three, a small minority of online groups (usually

¹³ *Bianca* was not included in the sample because their registration page was closed.

clearinghouse models) assure members in their Privacy Policies that no information is ever collected on their demographics or practices.

The fact that these communities are providing valuable information and even more desirable—a captive audience—to marketers is a reality that they hardly try to minimize. Many of these communities have web pages dedicated to corporate information, advertising, or sales. Online media kits directed towards potential partners and sponsors explain the many ways that virtual communities are the ideal venue through which marketers can reach their audiences. First and foremost, online communities promote both the expansive audience markets that they can deliver and the specificity of demographic information that they can provide about their audience. Returning to the case of *iVillage*, it claims an average reach of nearly 10% of the total online population.¹⁴ Its corporate profile page states that *iVillage* “offers advertisers and merchants one stop access to 1 in 7 of all women online aged 18 and up, 1 in 7 of all women online aged 25-54 and 1 in 6 in Women 25-34.”¹⁵

In addition, since the Internet excels in bringing together formerly disparate or marginalized groups of people, virtual communities have become an incredibly effective tool in bringing previously unreachable audiences to marketers. In its advertising pages, *Gay.com* explains how the Internet has finally made the gay and lesbian market accessible en masse:

Owned and operated by PlanetOut Partners, Inc., *Gay.com* and its sister brand PlanetOut.com market the largest subscription-based gay online dating services in the world with 3.5 million combined personals profiles, more than 8 million registered members, and 7 million unique monthly visitors. PlanetOut Partners uses its unprecedented reach and expertise to develop effective marketing programs for Global

¹⁴ *iVillage* claims to have a membership of over 11 million users. These statistics are reported by comScore Media Metrix from June 2003, on *iVillage Metrics*-July 2003 Page. Retrieved from http://www.corporate-ir.net/ireye/ir_site.shtml?ticker=IVTL&script=11947&layout=-6&item_id=%27metrics.htm%27 on March 15, 2004.

¹⁵ According to Media Metrix Digital Media Audience Ratings Report (9/03), as stated on “*iVillage* Top-Line metrics” page. Retrieved from http://www.ivillage.com/ivillage/adsales/articles/0,,269016_269024,00.html on March 15, 2004.

1000 companies and to sell products and services directly to customers through the company's e-commerce and travel divisions.¹⁶

When it comes to reaching this demographic, *the Web opens the closet door* and allows access to gay consumers in volume for the first time. Our sites reach 20 times more people than the top three gay magazines combined. Offline, we offer access to customers through our print properties, local event partnerships and other programs that tap into our unprecedented reach online.¹⁷

Boldly co-opting the language of "coming out of the closet" to describe the new access that the Internet provides marketers to the gay and lesbian community, the *Gay.com* website is equally frank about the fact that gay and lesbian Americans may be the "best customer" that advertisers and marketers encounter. As a minority target market, the 17 million gay and lesbian Americans possess the strongest buying power totaling \$464 billion.¹⁸ According to their demographic statistics, members of the website are most likely to be college graduates, professionals/managers, and thus, premier consumers. Sixty-five percent identify themselves as having to have the "latest"; 77% "believe in indulging themselves;" and 57% "prefer to buy top of the line."¹⁹ In addition, they are 1.5 times more likely to have high-speed Internet access, and compared to the national average, twice as likely to shop online for vacation packages and three times more likely to shop online for music and videos.²⁰ This information about the purchasing habits of *Gay.com's* members points to the second way in which virtual communities are an effective tool for marketing.

Not only are the members of these groups rendered into a promising aggregate of customers, but the groups demonstrate how their members match the profiles of those with

¹⁶ "About Gay.com" description in Feb. 5, 2004 press release.

¹⁷ "What you need to know" page of "Meet your Best Customer" segment. Retrieved from <http://www.planetoutpartners.com/sales/market.html> on March 15, 2004.

¹⁸ Ibid. This is compared to the 12 million Asian Americans who only generate about half of much buying power, and the 36 million African Americans who only can bring \$17.8K buying power per capita.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ According to the Planet Out Sales Kit, downloaded from "What you need to know" page of "Meet your Best Customer" segment. Retrieved from <http://www.planetoutpartners.com/sales/market.html> on March 15, 2004.

disposable income and active shopping practices. *iVillage* points out that their demographically targeted group of women possess significant buying power since they are mostly employed and married with an average household income of \$84,400.²¹ As one of the largest communities claiming 175 million registered users, *ICQ* serves a majority of users who are “a young (80% under 30) audience of early adopters. They are active shoppers and trend setters, gamers and media consumers, interested in music, sports, technology, & dating.”²²

Third, purchasing opportunities can actually be designed into the communities so that interested consumers can directly shop for merchandise related to the group’s identity, topic, or hobby. OSDN (Open Source Development Network, Inc.), the company that owns and operates *Slashdot* studies the usage and purchasing habits of OSDN site visitors, and claims that “almost 50% of the OSDN audience will click on online advertising” if they find it interesting, and “one-quarter have purchased a product while on an OSDN site.” Focused on serving individuals from the information technology and development communities, OSDN considers itself the premier media network for delivering a “highly-qualified, highly-technical, highly-informed and highly-involved” audience who “look for technology news online, and... have shopped for or purchased software online in the past 6 months.”²³

Fourth, the audiences that virtual groups deliver are promised to be active and loyal ones. Buzzwords like “interactivity” and “user stickiness” are used to describe the unique quality of participation found in online communities. On the “Advertise With Us” page, *ICQ*

²¹ According to MRI, (Spring 2003), as reported on “iVillage Top-Line metrics” page. Retrieved from http://www.ivillage.com/ivillage/adsales/articles/0,,269016_269024,00.html on March 15, 2004.

²² Quoted from “Advertise With Us” page, retrieved from <http://company.icq.com/info/advertise.html> on March 24, 2004.

²³ Quoted from 2004 Visitor Survey which reported findings from Nielsen/NetRatings (Fall 2003), downloaded from <http://advertising.osdn.com> on March 19, 2004.

users are claimed to be logged into *ICQ* for over 4 hours a day on average, accessing from a variety of their platforms and devices. *TalkCity's* online media kit presents a persuasive case to their potential online marketers about the capacity for community sites to deliver real customer loyalty:

People who join community sites have decided to put down a stake in a cyberneighborhood, which means they'll come back and stay for long periods of time. This differs greatly from the drive-by usage patterns on search engines and other Internet content sites, where people stay for, on average, only a few minutes, and develop no sense of loyalty to a particular site....Our customers' usage patterns lead the industry. Regular users log in for an average of 26 minutes every time they visit Talk City. This is about 1,000% longer than many search engines and other Internet content sites, and speaks to the 'stickiness,' or strong, engaged user loyalty our customers embody.²⁴

Fifth, virtual communities possess technical mechanisms that provide advertisers with an unparalleled degree of control in reaching its target market and managing the environment of their advertisements. For example, *ICQ* gives advertisers the capacity to employ the strategy of precision-targeting, by targeting advertisements by language, age, time of day, interest, and location. *DelphiForums*, another technical interface community, offers advertisers the opportunity to sponsor specific topical forums or channels. Professional teams of moderators are given enormous degrees of power to monitor discussions, serving the purpose of not only providing a neat and controlled product to its member-customers, but also using the resulting civility and efficiency to attract potential marketing clients who are concerned that hostile or off-color postings might damage their brand or product's image.

TalkCity, for instance, attempts to set itself apart by promoting its well-kept forums:

Talk City is distinguished from other community sites by our civilized, moderated online culture. Untoward and unseemly behavior simply isn't tolerated, and our culture of civility is maintained by virtue of our more than 700 moderators worldwide to make sure Talk City remains clean and well-lit.²⁵

²⁴ As quoted from *TalkCity's* "Online Media Kit." Retrieved from <http://www.talkcity.com/mediakit/welcome.html> on February 20, 2002.

²⁵ Ibid.

Though the economic realm has undoubtedly penetrated the social realm of the community, most online groups still keep the two separate within the organization of the community website. Advertising and sales information directed at potential clients are separated from regular content pages oriented towards community members. Most online communities maintain a division between the functions of the group as a community for its members and the functions of the group as a business for its marketers and sponsors. There are a few groups, however, that have blurred these lines and enmeshed their communal missions and purposes with their commercial interests and capacities. Take, for example, the case of *ThirdAge*, an online community for “midlife adults.” In its About Us page, the divide between the economic and the social is completely eliminated when members of the group are depicted both as community participants and potential consumers. The website states that the vision of the group is:

...to rewrite the rules of getting older and transform the voice of aging from one of limitation to one of possibility. Inspired by the French term ‘Troisieme Age,’ *ThirdAge* refers to the concept of lifelong learning, self-development and fulfillment, and the period of life following young adulthood, yet preceding ‘seniorhood’ and retirement. A time of life characterized by vital living, freedom, personal growth and enrichment.

Immediately following this inspiring—if not lofty—statement, the page makes a reference to the members as “the audience” stating,

We have spent seven years understanding and focusing on the ThirdAge audience and serving it by providing relevant content, products, services and community forums to learn and share with other like-minded individuals.... ThirdAge Inc. focuses exclusively on this audience, knows what’s in their hearts and minds, and serves them—and those who want to reach them—every day.

Rather than claiming to understand the hopes, concerns and challenges faced by its members in their particular life stage, the inside knowledge that the community claims to have is who its members are as consumers. Even in answering the question “Who are ThirdAgers?” the

text reads: "By 2005, close to 108 million people will be over the age of 45. This powerful block of midlifers in transition—Third Agers—will comprise 40 percent of the population and will have the majority of the buying power in the U.S." Further descriptions include information about the percentage of U.S. net worth that ThirdAgers will occupy, how much they will inherit from their parents, and what percentage of U.S. discretionary spending and control of personal financial assets they possess. Equating members' interests and identity with their purchasing preferences and financial status seamlessly fuses the good of the community with the good of the business. This is perhaps the most extreme example of how any resistance or discomfort over the juxtaposition of these historically contradictory realms lingering among the community providers or its members is rapidly eroding.

The cumulative effect of these instances of commodification can seem abstract when considered generally. But when situated within a context in which the social and political legitimacy of the members' or community's identity are at stake, the potential for very real ramifications becomes clear. The case I want to briefly consider is the online community that represents a minority or marginalized people group, for this sort of community is precisely the type that may possess high symbolic value and potentially influence how these groups are perceived in the broader social landscape.

First, as online communities become settings that render community members as consumers, social identity becomes increasingly defined and framed through the lens of niche marketing. The diverse choice of affinity groups and communities that individuals have online is in fact a freedom and choice bounded by pre-packaged strategies such as narrowcasting or "mass customization," employed to create "personalized" content aimed at specific audiences to maximize the efforts of advertising and marketing. In this context, one

of the concerns is that social identity becomes increasingly mediated and defined by the consumption of goods and images, to the extent that "consumer choice...replace[s] real social and political recognition, trivializing freedom through its reduction to the category of 'taste' (Dunn, p. 119).

Second, as individuals themselves understand their social identities in terms of their consumer choices, the proliferation of groups oriented around individualized lifestyle preferences create a perception of diversity in the Internet. Unfortunately, this diversity tends to be a matter of "distinctive packaging" rather than substantive differentiation. Real inequalities in income, race, and education are masked as the varied online communities for women, for African Americans, for the elderly, and for gay and lesbian people define their identities in terms of what products they buy, what hobbies and activities they enjoy. While the existence of these online groups appear to validate diversity and particularities, they actually have the opposite effect as their members are homogenously approached and framed as consumers. A brief visit to the community websites *iVillage*, *BET*, and *ThirdAge* reveals that they are surprisingly similar in form and content. The commodification of virtual communities exacerbates the existing cultural tendency to frame pluralism within an ethic of consumer choice and thus, potentially weakens our conception of true pluralism and diversity by claiming to represent it.

Third, the legitimacy that is granted to a minority or marginalized people group by virtue of having its own mainstream online community is evidence of how thoroughly social identity has become defined by the market. Given the digital divide's uneven distribution and use of the Internet by race and class, any relevant content directed towards underserved populations is perceived as a step forward in closing the gap. Unfortunately, the gains that

these developments might actually represent for such a population are often undermined by the way that they are primarily legitimized as a niche market rather than a socially or politically empowered group. Consider, for example, the creation of *BET.com* that resulted from BET Inc.'s partnership with such mainstream corporate giants as Microsoft, News Corporation, Liberty Digital Media, and USA Networks. For some, the success and mainstream status of *BET.com* indicated that "there's no reason to buy into the digital-divide cliché that there aren't any black people online" (McLaine 2003). Such a remark reflects how powerful the market has become in granting legitimacy to a minority groups and how easy it can mask lingering realities of inequality and difference.

Last, as online communities serve as a marketing tool for corporations, it is easy to confuse the interest that corporations have in reaching a particular niche market for the social and political empowerment of a minority group. Take, for instance, the timely addition of the Families Channel to *Gay.com* in the wake of the recent steps taken towards legalizing gay marriage. In response to the introduction of the new Families Channel, Senior Vice President of member sales and services, Jeff Titterton commented:

A channel offering informative and inspiring content for gay and lesbian parents and couples makes so much sense for our members and our business. Now Gay.com serves our members through every step and stage of life. I like to think of it this way: our users meeting Gay.com Personals, plan movie dates together in Entertainment, throw an amazing ceremony with Weddings, select a gay-friendly honeymoon destination in travel, plan their fiscal future in Finance and eventually go to the Parenting area of our new Families Channel for resources on having and raising children.²⁶

These remarks so effortlessly combine the hope of supporting gay and lesbian people through their experiences of major life transitions with the capacity to use each stage as a

²⁶ Quoted from "PlanetOut Partners Launches Families Channel on Gay.com and PlanetOut.com" press release from February 23, 2004. Retrieved from <http://www.planetoutpartners.com/pressreleases/?serum=9> on March 15, 2004.

touchpoint for cultivating consumer loyalty that the economic goals of building a loyal customer base are domesticated and legitimized by whatever social and political efficacy they may have. It epitomizes what the CEO of *Gay.com* once said, “[it is] good business to be altruistic” (Gamson 2003, p. 264). The worry is that as the market capitalizes on the dynamic energy of the gay and lesbian identity movement for economic gain, it achieves its commercial ends under the guise of social empowerment.

* * *

Clearly, the commercialization of virtual communities has had profound effects not only on their existing content and form, but more importantly, on the nature of the relationship between individual members and the community. More often than not, its participants are treated not as members, but consumers; in some cases, they are even explicitly referred to as “customers.” In turn, the online communities are driven to fashion themselves as providers of services for their members, on the one hand, and for marketers and sponsors on the other. These communities then literally become commodities themselves when they are featured as one among many services and activities offered by a content website. The explicit conflation of member and consumer, community and commodity, show that what historically has been considered contradictory, seem no longer to be the case. The implications that these newly inflected conceptions of membership and community have on democratic practices and public life are largely pessimistic.

In the previous chapter, we saw that the associational features of virtual communities lead to limited democratic potentials at best. Now, having taken into consideration the institutional context in which virtual communities function, we find that the construction and maintenance of online groups is engulfed in dynamics of consumer culture and market

mechanisms that will likely exacerbate the worst tendencies of online communities. As we have seen, public sphere effects for fostering deliberation and representation of diverse opinions and voices are undercut by the trivializing of identity and homogenizing of difference. Given the transformation of identity from member to consumer, developmental effects such as helping to build a sense of mutual trust, obligation and reciprocity are stunted by the elevation of the relationship between the individual and the “community as service” over and above the relationships among members. The expected dynamic in the relation between the individual and the community is largely a unidirectional process of reception and consumption. If anything is learned and translated to how individuals act as citizens, it is the inclination to approach communities, associations and government as services.

This overlap of citizen and consumer is not a new phenomena. In *Consumer's Republic* (2004), historian Lizabeth Cohen documents how the two ideal types, citizen and consumer have come together in multiple manifestations throughout twentieth-century American history—from the New Deal “citizen consumers” who saw the government as an ally in consumer rights, to the “purchaser consumers” of World War II whose mass consumption helped the country by stimulating the economy. The latest iteration of the citizen/consumer, however, reflects the extent to which the market has become a defining institution in public life. Cohen writes:

Whereas from the 1930s to as late as the 1970s, to refer to consumer interest was also to appeal to some larger public good beyond the individual's self-interest, the ubiquitous invocation of the consumer today—as patient, as parent, as social security recipient—often means satisfying the private interest of the paying customer, the combined consumer/citizen/taxpayer/voter whose greatest concern is, ‘Am I getting my money's worth?’ (p. 397)

The contemporary citizen views government and politics like any other market transaction, judging them according to how well they serve their self-interests, and whose economic

behavior is entwined with their rights and obligations as citizens. In turn, political campaigns and administrations frame the government as a service or corporation, needing to be reformed into a more efficient and productive machine. In light of this broader socio-political landscape, virtual communities do not necessarily introduce novel forms of relationships or conceptions of citizenship and community. Rather, their distinction and significance may lie in their being constituted by a technology that—in its material and institutional reality—has the effect of not only reinforcing the commodification of identity and community, but in fact, instantiating and radicalizing the prevailing cultural tendencies towards consumer sovereignty and personal autonomy.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

We must see technological determinism as one among a number of possible scenarios that depend at least in part on the choices we make about technology's use. If it enslaves us we will have chosen to act (or not act) in a fashion that permits our enslavement.

-Benjamin Barber

In this project, it has been necessary to first establish that the evaluation of online communities and their democratic efficacy is often distorted by a whole host of assumptions made about the nature of community, democracy, the Internet, and technology in general. The literature is frequently wrought with contested claims about authentic communities and overly broad predictions about how democracy will be saved or endangered by the Internet. Online communities are often analyzed only in terms of their computer-mediated features, narrowly defined in opposition to face-to-face groups. In response, this study has focused on presenting a case for how the specific content and form of virtual communities yield particular democratic effects. The analysis has sought to show that the internal organizational features and external institutional realities of the market play fundamental roles in shaping the experience of membership in virtual communities. Virtual communities are found to be complex institutions in their own right, as they simultaneously embody the cultural sensibility of cyberculture and the economic realities of the Internet.

Having carefully parsed through these thorny conceptual matters, what can be concluded about online communities? How does this analysis contribute to the ongoing debates about the Internet's role in revitalizing civic culture? Are these groups merely part of the overall decline in social capital as Robert Putnam claims, or are they a part of a legitimate countertrend as his critics suggest? This study offers three concluding observations.

First, in the analysis, I argue that most online communities are socially constituted and oriented towards exclusive group identity goods, and thus conducive to developing civic virtues of trust and commitment. However, with their high ease of exit, the majority of online communities foster weak forms of membership that lack expectations for mutual obligation and reciprocity—two key developmental effects that have been traditionally associated with sociability and social capital. Therefore, even if many people do end up turning to online communities as a means of sociability and activism, and if social bonds do develop in these social settings, they would not sufficiently indicate a propensity for virtual communities to revitalize civic culture. As Warren has argued, the connection between sociability and democratic vitality is not as direct as many assume. Sociability is necessary, but not sufficient; social connections form a foundation for civic life, but further developments in social practices that help people learn how to negotiate differences are just as necessary. This brings us to the second observation.

One of the most disheartening aspects of online communities is how, contrary to popular claims about the diversity and inclusivity of the Internet, matters of difference are rarely engaged. Both the technological and institutional features of online groups tend to keep people from even encountering difference. As communities of choice, online groups provide few opportunities for individuals to learn how to trust or work with those outside their affinity groups. Furthermore, the commercialization of virtual communities has the effect of reinforcing identities in terms of consumer choice and niche marketing, thus trivializing real differences and particularities. In this way, virtual communities have low potentials for producing many public sphere effects of fostering debate or deliberation.

Third and finally, the findings from this study lead me to agree with political scientist Bruce Bimber (1998) who concluded that virtual communities tend to produce "thin communities"—that is, communities in which "individuals' pursuit of personal interests works to the advantage of all," and are "prior to membership in the community"—as opposed to "thick communities" which consist of individuals whose very interests are fundamentally formed and shaped by the community itself (p. 10). In virtual communities, the freedom and license that the technological conditions of computer mediation permit are usually reinforced by the structural features. While an ethic of egalitarian and inclusive participation is pervasive in the discussion forums, exercising sanction in these virtual communities is made difficult by the lack of accountability built into their membership registration process and the distance gained through computer mediation. As the online components frame the individual as the locus of communal purpose and action, the market's influence further augments these tendencies for commercial ends.

While some of these conditions might work to foster habits of consensus building and encourage active participation, these potentials are usually not realized. Instead, the autonomy granted individuals is more often used to help them meet their own ends, for example, as individuals are given filtering tools that encourage them to selectively manage and control their entire communal experience. These factors suggest that online communities instantiate a therapeutic ethos that views the self as being ontologically prior to all moral claims (Rieff 1967; Lasch 1979; MacIntyre 1981). It is tempting then to conclude that virtual communities have fallen prey to the forces of individualism that are commonly lamented for corroding public-spirited commitments and political involvement (Bellah 1987). However, sociologist Paul Lichterman's ethnographic study of activist groups (1996)

suggests that institutions with a “personalist culture” are capable of meeting the individualist ends of self-fulfillment *without having it be at the expense of public commitment*. For in personalist institutions, individuality and personal authenticity are expected to develop *precisely* within the context of social interaction (unlike the narcissistic, privatized variety of individualism). Consequently, personalist cultures are dedicated to inclusive participation, encouraging members to ‘express themselves,’ even opening the community’s priorities and practices to debate and redefinition. As we have seen, this type of personalist culture is precisely what exists in the discourse and organization of online communities.

Because this analysis has focused exclusively on the structural features and institutional context of online communities, it can only point to the possible ways that their conditions are built upon and reinforce particular visions of the self. Further research would be necessary to more adequately diagnose the conceptions of the self supported by virtual communities. While this study has concentrated on the production of these groups, an examination of the reception—to see who members are, why they join, and what they like and value about their virtual communities—would help to give depth to our understanding of how the dynamics of virtual communities function to promote or dampen particular democratic dispositions and practices.

* *

Political theorist William Galston (1999) argued that, “Online groups can fulfill important emotional and utilitarian ends. But they must not be taken as comprehensive models of the future society” (p. 8). Indeed, the current trends in online communities may, in fact, be one more instance in which we see how the very institutions that have historically acted as a counterbalance to the individualizing and rationalizing forces of the market and modernity,

have been appropriated by them. However, these conclusions about virtual communities do not mean to suggest that the Internet is incapable of being used for robust democratic purposes. Contemporary social movements clearly benefit from the technology's capacity to enhance information dissemination and many-to-many communication. As new social movements are invested in promoting particular cultural values and cultural identities on an increasingly global scale, their needs for time-sensitive communication and flexible, horizontally-integrated organizational structures are met by the strengths of the Internet's instrumental capacities (Castells 2001).

Moreover, while the most popular types of virtual communities may yield limited democratic effects, it does not mean that the technology itself can not be more creatively used to help make possible meaningful and productive deliberation. Take, for example, the software system that was used to help a project called "Listening to the City" gather thousands of New Yorkers together to decide how Lower Manhattan ought to be redeveloped in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Developed by a small non-profit organization, Web Lab, the software helped to create social conditions that work against some of the worst tendencies of computer mediation and prevailing cultural conditions. First, as individuals registered to join the discussion, they were assigned to one of a number of smaller groups to make the discussions more manageable. Within these small groups, "people... are encouraged to get to know each other by posting their biographies online before they're allowed to post their thoughts on an issue" (Stirland 2003). In addition, the software is designed to use the demographic information entered by the participants to create groups that contain people from *different* backgrounds. These minor but insightful features creatively work to improve the quality and value of discussion.

This one example highlights the promising ways that technology can be used to work against the worst tendencies of contemporary public life, instead of exacerbating them. It also shows how computer technology can be actively designed and implemented to address specific circumstances that would benefit from many-to-many communication that spans distance and time. Such uses of technology and configurations of communal interactions are certainly possible, but would require intentional application and careful integration not only into the mainstream of the Internet, but also into the regular functioning and practice of civic life. This study has shown how virtual communities are, in many ways, an adaptation to *and* an extension of our present social and cultural milieu. Given the current institutional conditions of American political culture, it seems that it would take great effort to re-imagine and reconfigure virtual communities so that they can substantively help individuals and communities engage in civic involvement.

APPENDIX

<u>Website</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Distinction</u>
ACLU.org	online extension of American Civil Liberties Union	content / forums	Webby Nominee, Best Activism 2000
Altnet.org	alternative online magazine and information resource	content / forums	Webby Nominee, Best Activism 2002
Beliefnet.com	community site for discussing religion and spirituality	content / forums	YIL Best Community 2001, 2002; Webby Nominee, Best Community 2001, 2002
BET.com	online extension of Black Entertainment Television	full online services	YIL Best Community 2001, 2002
Bianca.com	alternative adult-oriented community hosting topical discussion	forums	Webby Nominee, Best Community 1998
Burningman.com	information and communication site for annual Burningman event	content / forums	Webby Nominee, Best Community 2002
Café.Utne.com	topical discussion forums sponsored by Utne magazine	forums	Webby Award, Best Community 2000
Craigslist.org	site for information exchange and discussion based around major cities	classifieds / forums	Webby and People's Choice Award, Best Community 2001
Delphiforums.com	interface platform for discussion forums	forums	Webby Nominee, Best Community 2002
Fictionalley.org	site for publishing and discussing Harry Potter fan fiction	personal publishing / forums	Webby Award, Best 2004
Fray.com	site for promoting storytelling on- and off-line	personal publishing / forums	Webby Nominee, Best Community 2001

Friendster.com	online social networking system for dating and making friends	networking tool	Webby Nominee, Best Community 2004
Gay.com	community site serving gay and lesbian people	full online services	YIL Best Community 2001, 2002
Geocaching.com	information and communication site for GPS gaming enthusiasts	content / forums	People's Choice Award, Best Community 2003
Greenpeace.org	online extension of Greenpeace	content / forums	People's Choice Award, Best Activism 2003
Icq.com	communication platforms and social networking services	forums / communication platforms	Webby Nominee, Best Community 2000
Idealist.org	nonprofit career center	content / forums / matching service	Webby and People's Choice Award, Best Community 2002
iVillage.com	community site serving women	full online services	YIL Best Community 2001, 2002
Kuro5hin.org	site for discussing technology and culture based on open-source system	collaborative content creation / personal publishing	Webby Nominee, Best Community 2001
Livejournal.com	personal publishing service	personal publishing / forums	Webby Nominee, Best Community 2003, People's Choice Award, Best Community 2004
Meetup.com	service for organizing local gatherings	organizational service / forums	Webby Award, Best Community 2003
MTBR.com	information and communication site for mountain biking enthusiasts	content / forums	Webby Nominee, Best Community 2000
Nervousness.org	site for participants in land-mail experiment hobbies	content / forums	Webby Nominee, Best Community 2003

Seniornet.com	community site serving older adults over 50	full online services	YIL Best Community 2001, Webby Award, Best Community 1999
Slashdot.org	site for discussing computer technology based on open-source system	collaborative content creation / personal publishing	People's Choice Award, Best Community 2000
Talkcity.com	interface platform for discussion forums and chat	forums / communication platforms	Webby Nominee, Best Community 1999
Thewell.com	pioneering online community hosting topical discussions	forums	Webby Award, Best Community 1998
Thirdage.com	community site for first-wave baby boomers, aged mid-40s through 50	full online services	Webby Nominee, Best Community 1999
Voiceyourself.com	information and communication site supporting environmental activism	content / forums	Webby Nominee, Best Activism 2003
Wikipedia.org	open-source encyclopedia project	collaborative content creation	Webby Nominee, Best Community 2004

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