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## **Group, Community, or Social Network: A Discussion**

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### **Introduction**

Group, community and social network are terms that are used almost interchangeably in popular and academic writing. The lack of specificity rarely bothers the reader since every English speaker has a tacit understanding of what each term means in context. To steal from the famous Supreme Court decision on pornography; we may not know how to define the terms group, community, and social network but we know them when we see them. These three types of relationships are essential webs of significance in which humans suspend themselves (Geertz, 1973, p. 5).

However, the lack of specificity in defining, using, or operationalizing these terms has led to a body of literature where well meaning authors state community is declining (Kavanaugh & Patterson, 2002) or thriving (Cherny, 1999); in the real world (Putnam, 2000) and on the internet (Baym, 1997). Each is correct within their frame of reference, however none are wholly accurate.

The internet with its complex topography of applications, purposes, and users (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002, p. 10), has been fertile ground for the debate on community. “Virtual communities are sometimes portrayed as a positive alternative to

the destruction of traditional community in modern industrial societies. Just as often, virtual communities are instead seen as “ersatz” communities...since they cannot be real communities they are fake (Komito, 1998, p. 97).” The extent debate on three arguments concerning the status of communities – community lost, community saved, and community liberated (Wellman & Leighton, 1979) - has been transferred to the new media of the internet.

This research found its genus in the question - do strongly linked (Granovetter, 1973) Instant Messenger Networks, where the usual communicative relationship is dyadic, rise to the level of community? In reading community, social network, and dyadic communication literature the underlying question became apparent - what does the author mean when they use the words “community” and “social network,” and how should these definitions be applied in online environments? This paper explores the meanings of community and its relationship to social network and group. Six types of computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments will be analyzed for the applicability of each term.

This paper does not distill the hundreds of years of writing on the concept of community, potentially going back to biblical times (Wellman & Gulia, 1996), into any single set of characteristics. Nor does it fully address issues of space or time as they impact on human collectives. Rather it attempts to clarify the issues as far as possible for future use in my research in online environments.

## **Definition**

In an effort to limit potential confusion, this paper will use the term “collective” to refer to groups of people in general. The Oxford American Dictionary (2001, p. 336) defines collective as “belonging or relating to all the members of a group.” Use of collective, in this context, should limit misunderstanding specifically surrounding the use of the term “group” throughout this paper.

## **Computer-Mediated Communication Environments**

Six different CMC environments will be discussed in this paper: email, email listserv, bulletin boards/message boards/newsgroups, chat, instant messenger, and weblogs. Each environment will be described including its mode of communication, requirements for access, and the availability of cross posting within the same environment. For this analysis each CMC environment is considered to be active and populated by involved participants who utilize standard technological and genre specifications for their environment. The CMC environment descriptions are arranged roughly in order of their entrance into popular usage.

CMC environments operate in one of two different modes: synchronous and asynchronous. In the synchronous form all participants must be online at the same time for messages to be posted and received without outside technological intervention. The asynchronous form allows participants to post their messages at anytime; this temporal discontinuity (Fox & Roberts, 1999, p. 645) means participants need not be online at the same time. The recipient can then read the final message at their convenience. When

both participants are online at the same time they may respond to each other's messages quickly enough to reach near-synchronous interaction.

Electronic mail (email) is the oldest form of electronic communication (Herring, 2002). As an asynchronous form, it allows participants to create messages and send them for later retrieval. The technology that makes email possible has been standardized allowing each participant access to messages regardless of the programs used in production and retrieval. Email is the classic example of one-to-one electronic communication; one sender sends a message to one receiver.

An email listserv is an automated email list; messages are sent to a distribution list of email addresses. When a message is sent to the listserv it is distributed to all of the email addresses on the list, nearly simultaneously. As with standard email, the participants need not be online at the same time to receive the messages. Cross posting between listservs is easily accomplished by adding the second listserv's email address to the distribution list. Listservs may be formal, as can be found in many professional organizations, or informal and ad hoc when a sender constructs a list of friends who will receive the same email invitation to a party. Listservs are an example of one-to-many communication; one sender sends a message to many receivers.

Bulletin board services (BBS) and message boards are electronic message centers that are usually centered on specific topics or interests. New messages are posted and receivers can post responses, answers to questions, or comments with the original message. These asynchronous environments often allow for threading so that the original message and all subsequent messages related to it are tied together with a visual thread line. To access a bulletin board or message board the participant is required to register

with the board owner and must be given a password. Some internet based bulletin boards allow anyone to read the message but only members may post responses. Cross posting between BBS' is usually not allowed. Because of the multi-stranded messages, comments, and comments to comments found in BBS' they are considered many-to-many communication.

Newsgroups are another form of asynchronous environment that is closely aligned with BBS'. These forums allow for online discussion similar to bulletin boards. Access to the posted messages is the primary difference between the two forms. While bulletin boards are now primarily accessed via the World Wide Web (WWW), having formerly been available only through direct dial-up to the host server; newsgroups are access either through the WWW or by using special software called a newsreader. Cross posting between newsgroups is allowed, though each newsgroup must be entered separately to read its message. Like BBS', newsgroups are many-to-many communication. For this paper BBS and newsgroups will be treated as one category where there are no significant differences between the two forms.

Chat spaces (including MUDs, MOOs, Internet, and virtual reality spaces) are synchronous venues where participants can communicate with one or all the participants logged into the system. These real time systems are accessed either through the WWW or through special software programs unique to the individual environment. Most spaces require at least a minimum registration process to establish a screen name before the participant can post a message. Chat spaces are tightly bounded and do not support cross posting between sites. Like BBS', chat spaces are considered many-to-many communication venues.

Instant messenger (IM) programs are hybrids of email and chat programs. To utilize an instant messenger the participants must be registered with the particular service and receive password for the specific system. Because the systems have not stabilized cross posting between programs is not allowed. Most IMs are synchronous environments, although some programs allow participants to post messages to others when they are offline. The receiver can then retrieve the message when they sign into the IM program. The usual IM message is a one-to-one communication, though some programs do allow for one-to-many distribution lists. The author's experience shows that IM participants are often heavily interlinked, so dyadic communication may occur simultaneously among several members of the collective allowing for comments to and about other participants interactively.

Weblogs (a.k.a. blogs) are recent additions to the CMC sphere. Blogs are asynchronous spaces on the WWW. Typically they are frequently updated personal webpages used primarily as personal journals (Bonus, Herring, Scheidt, & Wright, 2003). Often they allow comments from readers (Herring, Bonus, Scheidt, & Wright, 2003) similar to BBS' and may require registration before comments can be posted. With fast internet connections these environments can reach near-synchronous mode. Although cross posting is not allowed within blog software, intertextuality is achieved through hypertext linking between blogs. Blogs are many-to-many communication spaces allowing for the posting of messages, comments, and comments on comments.

## **Groups**

One cannot begin a discussion of community before making a short trip into the realm of groups. The Oxford American Dictionary (2001, p. 752) defines a group as “a number of people who work together or share certain beliefs.” Under this definition membership in a local religious organization would make one a part of a group.

Sumner’s (1906) definition encompasses the dictionary definition and furthers it by adding a boundary that casts group members and insiders and all others as outsiders. Homans’ (1951) furthered the definition by adding both size and time descriptors. For Homans a group is “a number of persons who communicate with one another often over a span of time, and who are few enough so that each person is able to communicate with all the others, not at second hand, through other people, but face-to-face (p. 1).”

Current internet environments are most often limited to text communication, with limited media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1984), and do not allow for the variety of information channels implied by ‘face-to-face’ in this context. Likewise online environments may contain many more people than an individual could communicate with face-to-face during an average time span. However the underlying level of intimacy implied in face-to-face communication is met in online environments. Online spaces have been found to be intimate enough to allow for the development and support the romantic feelings between online couples (Albright & Conran, 1995). Members of an online group can communicate with other members without utilizing second hand communication. Additionally the number of people one can communicate with is increased as the limitation for face-to-face synchronous one-on-one communication is lifted (Kling, 1996).

## **CMC Environments as Groups**

Four of the six CMC environments would be classed as groups: Listservs, BBS/Newsgroups, chat, and blogs. Of the remaining two, IM's may be considered groups if the technology is used to among heavily interlinked communicators. Finally email does not meet the definition of a group activity.

Email is a bounded activity between two parties making it a one-to-one form of communication. While the dyad may share beliefs and communicate often they definition of group is not met as the parties are too few to be classed as a group.

Listservs contain a minimum of three members. The collection of email receivers represented on the listserv distribution list may be a group if there is communication between the receivers; this type of group would be analogues to an offline civic organization. However if there is no communication between the receivers, the collection of receivers would be similar to people who subscribe to the same magazine.; there is a level of similar interest but only random interaction between receivers primarily by happenstance. Listserv members are also part of a bounded collective with insider status to the information found in the emails they receive.

BBS/Newsgroups, chat spaces, and blogs - with their many-to-many communication design - would be groups under this definition. They meet the requirement for boundaries through delimiting participants from non-participants. They share similar beliefs that brought them to the specific site.

IM environments limited to dyadic communication without heavy interlinking would not be considered groups. However IM collectives of three or more with heavy

interlinking, where messages and their attendant responses take place between many participants, and with shared beliefs among members can be considered a group under this definition. Like BBS' above, IM's are bounded with insider participants and outside non-participants.

## **Community**

The Oxford American Dictionary (2001, p. 347) and The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology (Johnson, 1995, p. 49) define a community in three different ways, a group of people: residing in a particular bounded geographical area; sharing a common characteristic such as an ethnic origin, hobby, religion, or profession; or sharing a feeling of fellowship as a result of a shared characteristic. These definitions are furthered by the implicit presumption that a community has a codified set of methods for dealing with member offenses and an anticipation of continuation (The Lumpen Society, 1997, p. 25).

Direct migration of these definitions to cyberspace is problematic and “fractures along lines of whether community is to be seen as real and essential, or as a social construction dependent on imagination (Fox et al., 1999, p. 644).” The internet allows for issues of common characteristics and feelings of fellowship to be more easily addressed as real while issues of bounded geography require imagination.

### **Community as Geography**

Discussions of community appear to be either implicitly or explicitly rooted in the concept of geography. A geographical community being the “‘where’ that social scientists can observe, visit, stay and go, engage in participant observations (Jones, 1998, p. 17).”

The literal example of community as geography is the pastoral village as a localized system of families (Hillery, Jr., 1963, p. 781). This type of community is an idealized type where relationships are characterized by *Gemeinschaft* - having intimate, mutually interdependent, and continuing relationships (Tönnies, 1995). Drawing a mental picture of simpler, quieter, more idyllic times in a quiet rural setting (The Lumpen Society, 1997). Also containing “the essence of... its presumptive perpetuity – you have to worry about other people because they will always be there (Sardar, 1996, p. 29).” All of these facets create a shared sense of belonging to a geographical place, creating an overarching context for social interaction (Sardar, 1996).

Other authors have taken the issue of the geographic space and translated it three-dimensionally into bounded space. Wellman (2003) explains communities as bounded, with most relationships happened within rather than across them the border. For Gotved (2002) community is a boundary activity where participants are preoccupied with establishing and maintaining borders, the border itself being the symbolic distinction between insider/us and outside/them.

Online environments are also considered by many to be bounded - “the participants do not interact in a borderless vastness (Gotved, 2002).” For Gotved (2002) the interface marks shared space. Fernback and Thompson (1995) see online community

as a collection of social relationships existing in cyberspace and established through repeated contact within a specified symbolically delineated boundary.

In online interactions the very concept of “cyberspace” creates both a sense of boundedness and place. Gibson (1994) made cyberspace real by characterizing it in spatial terms relating it to concepts of geography. The challenge for designers and programmers is to provide reasonable proof that there is a kind of space behind the flat screen, a shared location that invites interaction (Gotved, 2002). Stone (1991) found that online conference members very frequently referred to the conference as taking place in an architectural space. For Jones community is:

...the space within which the relations occur and the tool that individuals use to inhabit that space. It is more than the context within which social relations occur...for it is commented on and imaginatively constructed by symbolic processes initiated and maintained by individuals and groups (Jones, 1995: 16).

One significant difference between a terrestrial community and a community located in cyberspace is the issue of membership. In a geographical community membership is limited to those within the boundaries of the village. The primary means of entrance is birth into the community and the primary exit takes place at death. However a cyberspace community is self-selecting (Sardar, 1996) allowing members to enter and exit at will. Points of exit and entry delimit the different sites (Nunes, 1999).

### **Community as Shared Characteristics**

The shared characteristic definition of community relies on the boundaries created by participants to separate themselves from those that do not see the world as they do.

Their shared characteristic be it religion, hobby, ethnicity, or political viewpoint is the reason they were drawn together and the underlying reason they stay together. The separation of participants into a community based on shared characteristics creates a new collective self (Fernback & Thompson, 1995). Communities of shared characteristics create shared reality through interactive negotiation among their members (Baym, 1995).

A shared characteristic community is based on a web of affect-laden relationships that crisscross and reinforce one another, rather than simply a chain of dyadic relationships. Second a community requires a culture consisting of commitment to a set of shared values, mores, meanings, and a shared historical identity (Etzioni, 1996; Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999).

Thousands of these communities exist online as totally virtual collectives or as virtual arms of offline groups often social, civic, and political organizations; forming wherever people with common interests interact (Williams & Cothrel, 2000). Baym (2000) found this type of community in her work with an online soap opera fan newsgroup. The participants came from various social, professional, ethnic backgrounds, and were dispersed across the United States; though all were drawn together around their enjoyment of a soap opera. Likewise Schaap (2002) found a shared interest in creating a world of anthromorphic animals and humans with animal-like qualities.

### **Community as Shared Feeling**

The community based on shared feeling is often difficult to untangle from a community of shared interest where there is much deep and abiding emotion between the

participants. In disengaging the two concepts one must understand which came first, the joining around a shared characteristic or the shared feeling. Secondly if a shared characteristic can be identified is it a specific characteristic – interest in helping a community organization that supports a specific children’s organization that your child utilizes – or is it a undifferentiated characteristic - interest in making the community a better place to live. Clearly within one collective different participants could be involved because of their shared interests or their shared feelings.

Komito (1998) situates the concept of shared feeling as an underlying equation of the term community where solidarity, reciprocity, and support exist, even when criticism and conflict is acknowledged. This concept is reflective of Turner’s use of *communitas*. *Communitas* is the feeling between people during a period of liminality in which a relationship between individuals arises spontaneously and liberates them from conforming to general norms (Turner, 1978). “In these environments, diverse individuals are united without their identifying cultural trappings for the moment but can return to their respective subcultures following the experiential gathering (Turner, 1974).”

The online world is a liminal space, and other place where people gather around shared feelings. Cherny (1999) found a community of feeling in her ethnographic work in a virtual MUD. The original participants were drawn together around a desire to create a different online space than the one they were using for their discussions. Underlying their choice to separate from the original site as a group was a significant level of caring and mutual support among the members.

## **CMC Environments as Community**

The six CMC environments will be analyzed looking at applicability of the three main definitions of community under consideration in this paper; community as geography, community as shared characteristics, and community as shared feeling.

Email environments as dyadic communication do not meet any of the three definitions in question. Additionally email environments are not geographically bounded by a shared space or interface. Email correspondents produce their writings independently and remotely in a variety of possible software packages. Therefore email participants do not meet the definition of a geographic community.

Email listserv and BBS/newsgroups can support communities provided they are used for discussion and not just as forums for distributing announcements (Preece, 1999). BBS/newsgroup environments along with chat spaces and blogs have bounded spaces with known entrance and exit points. However listservs like dyadic email does not have bounded shared space. All four environments support the interaction of participants around shared characteristics. Each allows for message, comments, and comments on comments. Finally all four also allow for the development of community around shared feelings.

IM's environments as dyadic communication and without heavy interlinking would not meet the definition of community. The following discussion explores the possibility of community within a heavily interlinked IM. IM participants utilize a shared interface that creates the space of interaction. Like listservs, IM environments support the creation and maintenance of communities built around shared characteristics or shared feelings.

## **Social Networks**

Neither the Oxford American Dictionary nor The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology provides a definition for the term “social network.” The Encyclopedia of Sociology (Marsden, 2000, p. 2727) defines the term as “structures of relationships linking social actors.” It elaborates on this short definition by adding that social networks provide emotional support as well as instrumental aid to participants.

Social networks have been defined as personal communities (Wellman, Carrington, & Hall, 1988). Personal community focuses on the inherently social nature of community and avoid the trap of looking for community only in spatially defined areas (Wellman, 1999). This definition shifts the frame away from the geographical and into a discussion of spheres of individual influence.

Rather than study communities defined by neighborhoods, we examined communities defined by networks. Most important, the network approach has enabled us to see which attributes of ties and networks best foster sociable relations, interpersonal support, informal social control, and a sense of personal identity - the traditional output variables of community studies. (Wellman et al., 1988, p. 131)

Social networks are drawn around a single individual, at the micro level, or around a collective, at the macro level. Studies of a single individuals personal network are often referred to a “ego-centered networks” (Schensul, LeCompte, Trotter, II, Cromley, & Singer, 1999; McCarty, 2002). While studies of multiple networks from a single collective are called “whole networks“ (Wellman, 1999; McCarty, 2002), which allows the researcher to view the entire network and it’s parts individually. Neither level of analysis exists independently, Wellman (1988) frames the discussion around the extent

to which dyadic interpersonal ties should be analyzed without taking into account how such ties fit into larger social networks (Wellman et al., 1988).

As individual spheres personal communities seldom have well-defined boundaries (Wellman et al., 1988). Networks may be tightly-bounded where almost all the personal relationships for most participants take place within the collective. In a loosely-bounded network many participants would have personal relationships outside the collective (Wellman, 2001).

In their study of East Yorkers, Wellman, Carrington, & Hall (1988) found that while their subjects had well developed personal networks, these networks are not traditional communities because they lack the geographically bounded component of classical community definitions. Only those participants who spent a great deal of time at home, particularly homemakers and retirees, tended to know many people in their geographical neighborhood (Wellman et al., 1988).

Wellman's later work has built on these themes further defining a group as a special type of social network, one that is both densely knit and tightly bounded (Wellman, 1999; 2001). Densely knit groups are found in CMC environments where all participants read and respond to all communications and so are directly connected to each other online (Wellman, 2001). In his most recent work Wellman has drawn the lens back to look at groups as a whole and has found community, using a definition similar to *communitas*, in networks but not in groups (Wellman, 2003).

In foreseeing geographically boundless sociality online Licklider and Taylor (1968, p. 30) suggested that "life will be happier for the on-line individual because the people with whom one interacts most strongly will be selected more by commonality of

interests and goals than by accidents of proximity.” Wellman (2001) said more simply, “When a computer network connects people, it is a social network.” CMC environments use connected computer networks to link participants who then create embedded social networks. Social networks online inherently connect all participants directly in that everyone can read all messages, but the size of the network and its fragmentation means that few members are strongly connected (Wellman, 1997). Wellman has also suggested that social networks online have not been studied well enough understand the patterns of relationships that people have online in addition to fine-grained analyses of online dyads (Wellman, 2001).

## **CMC Environments as Social Networks**

The six CMC environments will be analyzed looking at applicability of the definition of social network to the environment.

Email environments, as we have seen with the definitions of group and community, do not meet the definition of a social network because they are dyadic relationships.

Listserves, BBS/Newsgroups, Chat, IM, and Blogs support social networks at both the ego-centered and whole network levels through their status as many-to-many communication venues. These environments potentially provide space for small cliques in which all participants are directly linked with other participants using the environment (Wellman et al., 1988).

## Conclusion

The definitions of “group” and “social network” are fairly straight forward giving rise to problems only when used interchangeably with community (Kling & Courtright, 2003). The definition of “community,” however, is a slippery slope, Bell and Newby (1974, p. xliii) state that there has never been a satisfactory definition of community. In everyday usage it has joined the ranks of such words as sexuality and development, words whose meanings have become stretched so far that they are essentially meaningless (Poerksen, 1995, p. 6). Fernback and Thompson (1995) would disagree with Poerksen, as they see the concept of community as dynamic in nature. As society evolves the notion of community evolves concomitantly.

Both Hillery (1963) and Stacey (1974) avoid the use of the term “community” because it is a catch all term for a motley assortment of concepts and qualitatively different phenomena. Stacey endorsed the uses “social system” as a set of inter-related social institutions covering all aspects of social life and belief system that supports social life.

The web is a social space (Donath, 2002), a space where social dynamics are much the same as in the face-to-face world. Both involve developing a web of relationships among people, a community that happens to exist online, rather than in the physical world (Kim, 2000). Nevertheless, the concept of community is still nebulous due to a lack of shared definitions about what exactly constitutes community in cyberspace (Fernback et al., 1995).

This paper has attempted to explicate some of the definitions of group, community, and social network and to apply the definitions to computer-mediated communication environments. This analysis has shown that while email, as a dyadic tool, does not, in and of itself, meet any of the three definitions; it can be used as a tool primarily to support relationships formed in one of the other environments or via listserv.

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